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This thesis explores the intersection between English Language Arts pedagogical and classroom climate strategies grounded in Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP), and adolescent sense of classroom belonging. This was done by exploring – in a classroom employing culturally relevant strategies - students’ reports of classroom connections to their identities and cultures, their sense of agency regarding negotiating a place for themselves at school, and their sense of connection to learning (all of which are at the heart of belonging). Specifically, this project: 1) embedded class activities / experiences reflecting a culturally relevant lens in three, sixth-grade, English Language Arts classes; 2) analyzed, with students, the values and impact of such activities (i.e., what is the relationship between Culturally Relevant experiences and their classroom connections to their own identity and culture); and 3) how students reported that such connections relate to their sense of belonging, and their engagement/motivation in their class.

CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY AND
ITS IMPACT ON STUDENT BELONGING

by

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Today, as demographics in the United States shift and student populations become increasingly diverse (Taylor, Kumi-Yeboah & Ringlaben, 2016), meeting the needs of all students - who may not all share the same language or cultural reference points, values or goals regarding school and learning – can appear to be an unsurmountable challenge. A 2010 report by the National Center for Education Statistics, indicated Latina/o, African-American, and Asian students make up the majority of learners within American K-12 classrooms. However, the academic performance gap between non-mainstream, multilingual, non-white students, and white, English speaking students continues to grow (Garcia, Kleifgen & Falchi, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2005; Aud, Fox & KewalRamani 2010). This is especially alarming given that in 2012, 83% percent of full-time public-school teachers were White (while only 7% were Black, 7% were Hispanic, and 1% were Asian) and may or may not be prepared to consider the ramifications of such diversity for teaching and learning (Aud, Hussar, Johnson, Kena, & Roth, 2013). Academic performance gaps may result from classroom practices grounded within a “*whitestream*” curriculum that often ignores – or is uninformed about - the cultural identities or perspectives of non-white / non-English-speaking students. (Urietta, 2009). Therefore, strong consideration needs to be given to a teacher’s role in creating

learning environments which not only promote academic equity and excellence, but honor the culture and identity of every student.

White & Clark (2005), therefore suggest that all teachers take a more *Culturally Responsive* approach toward teaching, arguing that such an approach has the potential to bridge language and cultural gaps, and therefore potentially ameliorate the barriers to learning that lead to gaps between *minoritized* students (Harper, 2013), and mainstream, white, English speaking students. Building on this perspective, Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) explains that teachers who are successful when working with minoritized students often accomplish this through: 1) an insistence on high expectations/academic success, 2) cultural competence, and 3) critical consciousness, *for all students* (Ladson-Billings, 1995). One reason that bridging such gaps is so promising is that it also offers an avenue for supporting the sense of school belonging of diverse students. Belonging is known to be grounded significantly in connections between students' identity/culture, and their experiences at school (Faircloth & McClanahan 2017a, 2017b), and to be a potent anchor for student motivation and engagement (Faircloth, 2009).

In light of this potential, the purpose of this thesis is to explore the intersection between English Language Arts pedagogical and classroom climate strategies grounded in Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP), and aspects of adolescent sense of classroom belonging. This will be done by exploring – in a classroom employing culturally relevant strategies - students' reports of classroom connections to their identities and cultures, their sense of agency regarding negotiating a place for themselves at school, and their sense of connection to learning (all of which are at the heart of belonging). Specifically,

this project will: 1) embed class activities / experiences reflecting a culturally relevant lens in three, sixth-grade, English Language Arts classes; 2) analyze, with students, the values and impact of such activities (i.e., what is the relationship between Culturally Relevant experiences and their classroom connections to their own identity and culture); and 3) how students report that such connections relate to their sense of belonging, and their engagement/motivation in their class.

Background

In order to explore the intersection between Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Classroom Belonging, some background is necessary. An understanding of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP), including its derivation, is a helpful starting point. Moreover, there are several other theoretical models with goals and conceptual frameworks similar to CRP that overlap and inform this work. In addition, it is important to draw from existing examples that weave CRP-based strategies into English Language Arts classrooms at the middle- and high-school level. One powerful avenue for understanding the impact of CRP on students is to understand the nature and function of classroom belonging. A review of that research and theory reveals its essential nature to student motivation and engagement. Moreover, the trajectory of belonging research has moved beyond traditional models that emphasize only social relationships and fitting in, to models that emphasize more complex understandings of belonging such as the role of identity, culture, agency, and “critical” aspects of belonging, all of which can draw richly on CRP. Weaving these two conceptual models together (CRP & contemporary models of belonging) promises a potentially powerful avenue for supporting student engagement,

motivation, and achievement in ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse classrooms.

Sense of Classroom Belonging

Traditional Foundations of Belonging.

Supporting and maintaining students' academic motivation, engagement, agency, and achievement has been a major national concern for decades, attracting extensive and painstaking research and theoretical work. Sense of Classroom Belonging has become accepted as a relevant factor in these efforts. One of the most important aspects of belonging that has emerged from both theory and research relates to its essential nature. Rather than merely offering an extra benefit to students, sense of belonging appears to be required groundwork for motivation and engagement. For example, according to many psychological theories, human behavior and motivation are enhanced when basic needs are met. In one of the first major articles addressing belonging, Baumeister and Leary (1995) demonstrated that the need for belonging (defined as *the need to form at least a minimum quantity of affectively positive connections within one's context*. p.497) is so embedded in human nature, that it dominates an individual's emotions, cognition, behavior, and health. In relation to Maslow's (1999) well known hierarchy of psychological needs, the need to belong must be met before higher level needs, such as motivated engagement, can occur. Research also began to reveal that a student's sense of belonging helped determine whether students withdrew (either emotionally or physically) from school (e.g., Leithword & Aitken, 1995). Each of these perspectives shed light on the vital role of belonging in influencing student success in school.

Faircloth and Hamm (2005) explored the intersection between various dimensions of belonging, traditional motivational variables, and student achievement among a large, diverse sample of high school students (n=5494). In this study, they found that belonging completely explained (mediated) the relationship between traditionally recognized motivational variables (e.g., students' self-efficacy and the value they place on schoolwork) and academic success for African-American and Latino students' experience. In other words, belonging was *essential* to student motivation as well as achievement. Belonging also explained a large portion of this relationship among European American students and students of Asian descent as well. A broad array of research studies have indicated similar findings (Anderman, 1999; Goodenow, 1993, Roeser et al, 1996, Voelkl, 1997).

Early research on belonging focused on “fitting in” through student participation in social groupings and school activities. Positive perceptions of school were found to be directly related to student's quality of relationships experienced with classroom teachers. (Ryan, Stiller & Lynch 1994; Skinner and Belmont, 1993; Wentzel, 1998); peer relationships and friendships among school members (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005; Osterman, 2000); and, to a lesser degree, involvement in school activities beyond the classroom (Finn, 1989, Lamborn, Newmann, & Wehlage, 1992).

Based on these early models of classroom belonging, Goodenow (1993) designed what has come to be the classic survey measure of belonging, the “Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM). This 18-item student questionnaire is designed to measure and evaluate a student's perceived sense of belonging in their school setting.

Goodenow defined this sense of connection as “*students’ sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others (teacher & peers) in the school setting and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of their school*” (p. 25).

The survey focuses specifically on three factors: general belonging, teacher-student relationships, and support from fellow classmates. Goodenow went on to design the Classroom Belonging and Support Scale (CBSS), a related survey to assess students’ sense of belonging within specific classrooms, not just the school as a whole (since many students may receive supports for belonging within specific classrooms). Work with these two instruments has provided consistent support for their statistical validity and reliability (Goodenow, 1993). Research also points to positive relationships between the factors measured by the PSSM/CBSS and positive school affect, motivation, engagement and achievement (Anderman, 1999; Goodenow, 1993; Osborne, 1997). An extensive review of belonging research by Osterman (2000) summarizes these traditional understandings of belonging and its influence on student engagement and motivation.

Emerging Sociocultural Perspectives on Belonging.

Over time, the progression of belonging research was transformed by growing insights emerging from Socio-cultural theory that emphasized the situated, negotiated, cultural nature of all experiences. In early work from a socio-cultural perspective, Lave and Wenger (1991) explained the socio-cultural nature of becoming a member of any context (with unintended but significant implications for belonging). Individuals do not automatically become an active member of a community (therefore feeling like they belong), but rather can negotiate their way from peripheral to more central participation if

given the opportunity to do so in a way that is meaningful to them (i.e., through *legitimate peripheral participation*). Unfortunately, as Hickey (2003) asserts, this type of participation is uncommon in school settings, as common school practices often encourage non-meaningful engagement or non-participation (i.e., compliance and docility). A sociocultural view also highlights that for students who find themselves outside the cultural mainstream, school connections (and hence belonging) may be weakened by school practices which only reflect the dominant culture (Hatt 2007; Urietta, 2009). The cultural contrasts (home culture vs school norms) faced by many students with non-dominant backgrounds can create “barriers” that a student must negotiate in order to succeed – or even care about succeeding at school. In her blog, Sara Ahmed’s aptly describes such barriers as “*atmospheric walls*” (2014, September, 15).

One particular focus that derived from sociocultural theory and research has been a close look at how students construct their identity(s) in ways that help them to feel like they “fit in”; that is, can they construct an identity in which they “*become a part of the story*” of participation and learning in their classroom (McCarthy & Moje, 2002, p. 232). Historically, Bakhtin (as cited in Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998) used the term “self-authoring” to describe this process in which people co-construct potentially meaningful identity(s) (participation) within a context. Critical theorists indicate that students are more successful when learning experiences are authentic and meaningful to them (Fine, 1991, Freire, 1970, Greene, 1995). However, again, as Hargreaves (1996) points out, many students do not get the opportunity to connect learning to their lived experiences or meaningful issues, a deficiency which has not only silenced student voices

but alienated them from educational experiences. In research, students have described frustration - and barriers to their engagement and learning - within learning settings that lack congruence with their lived experiences, culture, or personal interests (Hatt, 2007; Wortham, 2004; Moll, 1990).

The next wave of belonging research therefore began to attend to a more socio-cultural view of belonging. Anderman and Freeman highlighted potential insights provided by sociocultural theory rooted in the work of Lev Vygotsky (1978). Vygotsky's view is one that requires us to pay attention to individual, interpersonal, *and* cultural-historical factors in youth development, as they mutually influence one another (Tudge & Scrimsher, 2003).

Drawing from contemporary models of schooling that honored a socio-cultural lens (i.e., cultural modeling [Lee, 2007] and third space/hybrid identities [Gutierrez, 2008; Gutierrez and Larson, 2007; Moje et al. 2004]), Faircloth (2009) studied adolescents' self-reported perspectives regarding whether learning experiences grounded in individual, interpersonal and cultural-historical aspects of their lives could strengthen their connections to learning. As one example, when studying *The Odyssey*, students discussed/wrote about goals they would be willing to devote a lifetime to – as Odysseus had. They then described the relationship (or non-relationship) between schoolwork and such personally relevant goals. They worked with the teacher and researcher to identify ways that stronger connections between learning and their lives and background could be achieved, in a process similar to *critical conversations* (Vetter, in press). At the end of the semester, the students participated in interviews addressing their experiences in their

English class. Three issues dominated students' comments: Nearly every student reported the value of relating class activities to: 1) their identity or sense of self, and 2) their culture and community (*"Why are all the characters in the books we read White?"*). Class members also specifically described feeling more connected to class when they participated in activities that allowed them to 3) *express* their identity or *exercise agency* (*"I feel like my voice got bigger."*). Although they valued their relationship with their teachers and peers, these three new sociocultural dimensions of belonging seemed to be more fundamental to their classroom belonging than relationships with teachers and peers.

Faircloth's (2010) follow up study, with the next cohort of ninth grade English students in the same setting, harnessed insights from the previous study by inviting students to take the lead in their own learning (e.g., by researching self-selected topics of individual interest; sometimes referred to as *Kid's Business*, Fairbanks, 2000). The purpose of the study was to explore whether students experienced a greater sense of belonging and engagement when they have choice and agency to negotiate meaningful participation as a learner. The self-selected topics of choice ranged from abuse and depression to jail, gangs, and guns. Students researched the topics and had the opportunity to choose how they would report their findings, such as plays or pamphlets or another medium of their choice. At the end of the year, students were interviewed and given opportunities to share their perspectives on this learning experience. When students compared the learning in this English Language Class to other classes one person stated, *"Compared to this class, in most school work I am wearing a mask instead of feeling*

connected.” One student offered a rich summary of the impact of such experiences, describing them as a “*buoy*” to his learning experience. The opportunities provided by this classroom teacher – grounded in sociocultural aspects of students’ lives - indicated that even typically low performing, dissatisfied students in high needs schools can find meaningful engagement and belonging in learning through relatively modest, reproducible strategies that fit within the normal requirements of high school English. Connecting to socio-cultural aspects of students’ lives, sometimes by engaging students directly as partners in the learning process - can garner great results (see also Fairbanks & Ariail, 2006).

In an effort to explore the competing models of belonging that were emerging, Faircloth (2010) used Confirmatory Factor Analysis to compare the goodness of fit of data (from the Classroom Belonging and Support Scale) with Goodenow’s three factor model of belonging (associated with social relationships [general belonging, teaching bonding and peer support]) compared to Faircloth’s three factor, socio-cultural, model of belonging (focusing on student identity, culture & voice). In this analysis, the results indicated that the model of belonging which reflected student voice, culture, and identity fit student responses better than one based solely on social relationships.

A Critical Lens on Belonging.

As belonging entered the current decade, the notion that belonging is an essential part of students’ engagement and achievement, and is grounded in sociocultural aspects of students’ lives, was well established. However, even these contemporary models of belonging are not without flaws, especially when they reflect a focus on belonging as an

individually experienced phenomenon, rather than understanding its negotiated, socio cultural nature. In addition, views of belonging have often been based on unity or sameness (which ultimately can exclude as much as it might include). Bettez (2011), in her article “*Beyond Belonging*,” took issue with ideas of belonging and community that founded sameness and unity, are primarily focused on the individual, or ignore issues of social-justice and social responsibility. In our diverse, public school classrooms, she argued that it is vital that we work for understandings and applications of belonging that resist the demand for sameness, and focus rather on building an appreciation of our diversity. She also suggests that in order to build socially-just models of belonging, we must embrace a socially-responsible notion of cross-cultural interactions and communication. In her attempts to work with own her participants to develop an understanding of how to build community, she emphasizes the role of reciprocal relationships, and building relationships and communication skill across cultural differences. These insights are of great value to the study of belonging.

On a similar note, Gray (2014) used “optimal distinctiveness theory” to challenge the traditional notion of belonging as “fitting in”. His work provides examples of “standing out” which compliments the notion of “fitting in” in order to create optimal experiences of psychological connection for each member of a classroom community. This again emphasizes the importance of focusing on an individual’s ability to negotiate their own sense of belonging, against the background of mainstream educational values, norms, and standards.

In a preliminary attempt to explore these new understandings of belonging, Faircloth and McClanahan (2017) explored belonging through the eyes of three classes of diverse sixth graders in their English Language Arts classroom, within a struggling, public middle school. While partnering with students and listening to them, asking them to explain, repeatedly, over the course of a year - through classroom assignments, observations and discussion, artifacts of students work, focus group discussions and qualitative surveys - the authors aimed to honor and reflect the youths' voices as they explained belonging. Although observations of these three classrooms suggest a strong traditional sense of classroom belonging among students (They knew their teacher cared for them, and most had strong peer relationships in class.), it was clear that the students' experience of belonging went far beyond an individual experience based solely in unity. They began to recognize aspects of their lives and perspectives (e.g., sexual preference, poverty, language, academic struggles) that they felt did not "belong" (or were not safe) at school and wanted to do something about it. They explained the importance of having their perspectives validated (hinting at the importance of a co-construction of belonging). When this did not happen, they felt they wanted to "*cry like thunder*" or "*scream on the inside.*" In addition, simply having their learning activities relate to their identity or culture was insufficient. They insisted on *enacting* their identity (not just understanding it). They wanted to, "*be involved in what is going on in the world,*" in "*real issues.*" Rather than belonging being an individual experience, they insisted that they were "*building belonging together,*" accepting responsibility to make belonging a reality in their class.

In the article *Mere Belonging*, Walton, et. al. (2012) points out that even the most minimal attempts to provide connectedness can affect aspects of self in robust ways. The recent contributions to our understanding of belonging mentioned here have the potential to do just that by bringing a more empowering, collective and critical lens to bear on the issue of belonging. This may be especially important for minoritized/marginalized students for whom mainstream identities and norms may not be appropriate, who may therefore experience a particularly acute dispossession from sense of self, community, and agency (and therefore loss of belonging) in “whitestream” schools (Urrietta, 2009). It is therefore at this juncture in the trajectory of belonging theory and research that exploring Culturally Relevant Pedagogy seems most warranted.

Although the tenets of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy do not necessarily speak directly to the concept of belonging, recent research suggests that Culturally Relevant Pedagogy can promote belonging. For example, Howard (2001) found that African-American students were motivated and felt successful in Culturally Relevant Teaching environments where the teacher worked to strengthen the classroom community and establish bonds between students through rituals like Morning Meetings and Share times. Through established classroom routines like these, students took turns sharing personal experiences and insights with one another on a daily basis. This practice also helped foster an understanding and appreciation of individual communication styles which may differ from one ethnicity to another (Brown, 2003). Howard (2001) also emphasized the significance of students’ appreciation and respect for established routines and rituals that make the classroom environment “*feel like home*” (Howard, 2001, p 141). These

practices and procedures work to give students a comfortable space where they feel their voice can be heard and they are able to contribute in some way to their learning and environment. Sharing personal insights and participating in classroom routines and rituals can therefore increase individual cultural capital among peers and provides an avenue for a student's academic success. These findings reflect support for experiences that parallel belonging as described in previous research (e.g., Faircloth & Hamm, 2007; Ryan, et al., 1994).

In an additional study designed to develop and validate a measure to gauge students' perceptions of Culturally Relevant Teaching practices, Dickenson, Chun and Fernandez (2016) designed the Student Measure of Culturally Responsive Teaching (SMCRT). The measure was administered to 748 Hispanic, 15 African-American, 128 Caucasian, 15 Asian, 12 Native American 11-14 year olds (equal proportions male and female) living along the U.S. Mexico border. The measurement was used in tandem with the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (PSSM; Goodenow, 1993) which gauges students' perceived sense of belonging at their school at large. The results suggested a positive correlation between Culturally Relevant Teaching practices and students' Sense of Belonging with the school as a whole. It will be the goal of this study to further explore the relationship between these two important variables focusing on classroom level factors that impact belonging, and seated in a middle school classroom, for which there is a very small research base.

CHAPTER II

CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY

Origin of CRP

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy was first introduced by Cadzen and Leggett in the 1980's when they asserted that teachers not only need to be cognizant of their individual student's learning styles and preferences, but most also be active in accommodating learning differences. In the 1990's, this notion was expanded and coined Culturally Relevant Pedagogy by Gloria Ladson-Billings, a professor of multicultural education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Ladson-Billings' awareness of the need for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy came in response to her first-hand experiences with academic inequity as a minority student in public schools (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Growing up as a minority student, Ladson-Billings attributes her success to the African-American teachers who believed in her abilities to learn. From her personal experience, she came to recognize the vast marginalization of students of color and its effect on individual achievement (Ladson-Billings, 2001, 2009). In her ground-breaking article, "But That's Just Good Teaching! The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy", and her book, *Dreamkeepers*, Ladson-Billings referred to Culturally Relevant Pedagogy as an extension of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, explaining that Culturally Relevant Pedagogy works to "link schooling and culture" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160). In her study, African American parents were asked to nominate successful teacher participants,

based upon their child's positive classroom experiences. Principals were asked to nominate teacher participants as well, and selected teachers who did not write up students for minor discipline issues, whose students attended school on a regular basis, and who exhibited high student achievement on standardized tests. During the study, participating teachers were interviewed, observed while teaching, surveyed and videotaped. Analyzing this wealth of data, Ladson-Billings became aware of consistent patterns that emerged in their teaching. Successful teachers of African American students in her study consistently exhibited consistent press for: 1) Academic Success, 2) Cultural Competence and 3) Critical (indeed sociopolitical) Consciousness. This came to define the three crucial elements necessary for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. Although many schools across the United States may take part in celebrating established holidays such as Black History Month or host events such as International Fairs each year, these well-intentioned actions often fall far short of respecting CRP insights and goals.

Exploring the Traditional Components of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.

Press for Academic Success.

The first tenet of Ladson-Billings theory is that there must be sufficient support for students to achieve academically. Although much of her research focuses on the achievement of African American students, she intended for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy to support the success of every student regardless of ethnicity (Ladson-Billings, 2001). One essential step toward this goal is for all teachers to set clear, high expectations for all students, and to do what it takes to help all students succeed (Ladson-Billings, 1995). There is no easy formula to follow but Ladson-Billings argues that

teachers must unwaveringly fight for this goal. She provides an example of a teacher who realized that a few of the African-American boys in her classroom held a powerful negative influence over other students in the class. The teacher took action in redirecting this pattern by tapping into each boys' personal interests and developed learning situations around those interests. This approach offered these students an opportunity to channel their leadership in a positive way, which in turn influenced other students in the classroom and promoted academic success. This type of creativity and determination is a required hallmark for teachers aiming to honor this pillar of CRP.

Ladson-Billings also worked to challenge long held beliefs of why many African American students have difficulty achieving in American classrooms. A prime example of such myths is that, "African-Americans do not value education". (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p 468). Ladson-Billings points out that the history of the African-American academic struggle provides strong research support that the lack of cultural compatibility within American classrooms is the prime source of academic disparity and barriers, rather than a lack of interest on the student's, or their family's part. (Ladson-Billings, 1995)

Cultural Competence.

Maintaining one's cultural identity while achieving academically is another important component of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. Ladson-Billings (1995) pointed out that it is not uncommon for African-Americans to be shunned by their peers when it becomes obvious they are excelling. They may be taunted as "acting white" and in turn may shy away from being seen as intellectual (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). In order to

counteract this thinking, teachers can provide opportunities for students to draw upon their cultural identities to express themselves academically.

In 2002, in a move that echoed Ladson-Billing's thinking, Geneva Gay asserted that in order for teachers to build students' cultural competence it is important for teachers to examine their own personal biases and values to gain a better understanding of their own culture and ethnicity. This is vital in building relationships with students from different cultural backgrounds and ethnicities because comfort with one's own culture may be essential to understanding other perspectives and their importance (DuPraw & Axner, 1997). Gay also argued (again aligning her work with that of Ladson Billings) that taking time to successfully integrate students' personal experiences and cultural histories into their learning would help increase student engagement and motivation (2002). Although Culturally Relevant Pedagogy has been around for more than three decades, Ladson Billings agrees that this area needs significant work, in that the implementation of CRP often reflects a static, rigid, and superficial understanding of culture rather than a reflection of the fluid and dynamic nature of culture itself. (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

A tangible example of this goal being done well can be found in the article, "You Need Some Laugh Bones": Leveraging AAL in High School English Classroom". In this article, Dr. Amy Vetter highlights the effective ways a high school English teacher validated student language and culture by integrating African American Language within the class' day-to-day discourse (Vetter, 2013). This approach to teaching and learning can honor students' cultural identity, provide leadership and learning opportunities aligne

with each students' cultural identities in front of their peers, and thereby strengthen cultural competence.

Connecting the classroom to students' families can increase cultural competence as well. For example, inviting parents to participate in classroom experiences and showcasing their particular talents can enhance classroom community and highlight the strengths and assets cultures bring to a community or society. Also, allowing students to use home or first languages each day as they work to become more accomplished at Standard English (code switching), allows for freedom of expression and also increases proficiency in both languages (Cummins, Hu, Markus, Montero, 2015). Another possible activity to increase cultural competence involves teachers attending social or sports related events to extend support beyond the classroom to recognize and honor their students' competencies outside of class. Ladson-Billings also points out that Culturally Relevant teachers persist in making the classroom a collaborative environment where students see themselves as part of a community of learners who encourage one another to succeed.

Critical (Sociopolitical) Consciousness.

The third pillar of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy involves critical consciousness. This is an especially important tenet in that exercising critical consciousness and advocacy may often expose the very inequities that serve as barriers to learning. Ladson-Billings' research encourages teachers to self-reflect as well as prompt their students to critically evaluate established societal norms and values which tend to compound social inequities (Ladson-Billings, 1995). These inequities may have gone unnoticed, or simply

been accepted as, “the way things are.” (Ladson-Billings, 1995). For example, when teachers work with students to examine societal power structures that are in place within our educational systems and local communities, they help shed light on the expectations, norms and belief systems a society values most. Having students critically evaluate, offer solutions and take action to challenge this status quo strengthens student awareness and problem-solving skills, and potentially empowers them to dismantle such barriers (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Such practices extend learning beyond the classroom, supports equitable learning experiences, and develops students’ agency and advocacy, all of which are perfectly positioned to make learning more culturally relevant.

More recently, Urietta (2009) made a similar claim, arguing that educational curricula that do not support the heritage, customs, language and home experiences of the non-dominant culture results in a “*whitestream*” curriculum which can “*position*” students in unproductive ways. For example, some students may be positioned as low performing based on a pedagogical model that only reflects one narrow set of acceptable norms and standards, and does not reflect the culture of the student being “positioned” in this way (Urietta, p.37). Other students may be positioned as smart according to a narrow pedagogical lens, which may further challenge their connection with their own culture and peers. These positioning practices take place because of the lack of critical consciousness and the consequent lack of agency to address such issues, on the part of teachers, with obvious implications for the lack of these skills in their students.

Students’ own perceptions of positioning can determine how they choose to define/identify themselves among peers and adults in order to negotiate their learning

environments. In her case study which examined the identity construction of one female Latina high school student, (Vetter, 2015) found that students may construct “in between (hybrid) spaces” where their identities reflect movement in and out of the academic expectations of being smart while balancing the peer expectations of popularity, social inclusion, and cultural expectations. This work emphasizes the influence of positioning, and the skill of critical consciousness, upon the complex nature of identity work in adolescence.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy 2.0: The Remix

In 2014, Ladson-Billings published an article, *Culturally Relevant Pedagogy 2.0: aka The Remix* in response to the need to upgrade pedagogy to “reflect the fluidity of culture” (Ladson-Billings, 2014). In this more recent work, Ladson-Billings reflects on the shortcomings of Culturally Relevant practitioners, especially when applied by individuals with limited understanding of CRP. Ladson-Billings argues that Culturally Relevant Pedagogy has become completely watered down, to the point that her own work had become “unrecognizable” (2014, p. 82). She discussed how CRP is misinterpreted, corrupted and less effective, especially when true Cultural/Sociopolitical Consciousness is absent from the practice. For instance, while visiting classrooms where teachers are implementing CRP, Ladson-Billings noticed teachers making cultural ties to student learning and demonstrating strong belief in students’ abilities for success but did not engage or encourage students to critically evaluate school policies or question the status quo, or work to challenge and/or change certain rules and procedures that may seem

inequitable or overreaching. Sacrificing this crucial element of CRP denies students the opportunity to take part in building a true democracy. (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

In this 2014 article Ladson-Billings highlights Django Paris' work on *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy* as a positive move toward extending her work. Paris' work questions the depth of terms like "responsive" and "relevant," suggesting they "do not do enough" to maintain the complex and pluralistic needs of a multi-lingual society, as culture can be difficult to define and is constantly evolving (Paris, 2014). Perceptions of culture should extend into group affiliations such as gender, age, sex, religion which make up a person's cultural identity. Paris argues that in order to sustain individual student cultural competence, students must have access to the dominant cultural competence but still maintain links to individual first languages, values, and cultural practices of their heritage (Paris, 2014). He suggests that language, in particular, is a "crucial form of *sustenance*" (Paris & Alim, 2017, p. 45) for students (perhaps especially important for students with non-mainstream linguistic heritage). He argues that since language acts as a foundation for identity, agency and belonging within social contexts it should therefore be respected and promoted in pedagogical practice.

Paris and Alim illustrate their point through the narratives of two Latina youth (Isabel and Elisa) enrolled in the SKILLS program (School Kids Investigating Language in Life and Society) associated with the University of California, Santa Barbara, and their local communities. For participants in this program, the Skills program works with students ranging in age from 6-19 to support, develop, and maintain the languages customarily associated with each student's culture and community. The program also

supports students' learning of the dominant culture's language as well as strengthening students' awareness of social inequities and helps students find ways to challenge these inequities through "sociolinguistic justice" (Paris & Alim, 2017, 46).

Isabel's experience in the Skills program supplied her with the knowledge and confidence to orally present her cultural autobiography to her Spanish speaking community through *Spanglish* which is often considered a deficit language by both Spanish and English dominant speakers (Paris & Alim, 2017). Her presentation was a way for Isabel to demonstrate agency to her peers and community by showcasing confidence in her abilities to command two languages and to state publicly that "Spanglish is a skill and not a mistake" (Paris & Alim, p. 53) Isabel's choice to use Spanglish to present her cultural autobiography honored both her "ethnoracial identity" as well as her national identity. (Paris & Alim, 50). Elisa's participation and experiences in the Skills program differs from Isabel's in that Elisa's use of Spanish was seen as a valuable tool in her community since it enabled her to communicate/translate between the Spanish speaking community and her English-speaking school community. Though guidance from the directors of the Skills program, Elisa was able to enact her bilingual identity by extending her skills as a "language broker" between her own family, her school community, and her local community where she was able to interpret and translate for other schools as a member of her high school's interpreter club. Elisa's experiences though the Skills program strengthened her bilingual and cultural identity and provided her a sense of confidence and pride in her abilities. Salinas and Alarcón (2016) share another important example of the value of such opportunities, for late arrival immigrants

in particular. They describe the work of one high school social studies teacher who allowed her students to consider multiple perspectives and develop a critical lens regarding history. They observed her and her students co-construct a counter-narrative, which speaks back to the traditional historical narrative in their history classes. The researchers concluded that instead of following the traditional historical narrative, “social studies teachers may instead skillfully lead students in questioning dominant historical interpretations by introducing difficult histories. Exposing the enduring presence of racism, classism, sexism and so forth that define the struggle for citizenship as continual can serve as a catalyst for exchanges regarding historical perspective and civic identity (p. 81).” Given the rich and growing diversity of school demographics in our country, such enactments that parallel the critical elements of CRP: The Remix are sources of great hope.

This evolving lens reflects the powerful roots of Cultural Relevant Pedagogy (perhaps especially Cultural Competence and Critical Consciousness), while illustrating the importance of enacting those roots with fidelity. It also highlights the very practical nature of such work, understood to simply require “sustaining” students’ own cultural and linguistic heritage. Further exploration of applications of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy 2.0 (as illustrated in models such as Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy) also reveal its extraordinary potential. From this point on in this thesis, the term CRP will be understood to refer to derivations of CRP that reflect this “remixed” understanding, including new iterations of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and especially the contributions of Cultural Sustaining Pedagogy.

Implementation of the Culturally Relevant Pedagogy Remix.

A brief review of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy research illustrates what it looks like in classrooms in general, as well as English Language Arts classrooms in particular. It also provides insights into its impact on middle and high school students, and where available, beginning glimpses of its relationship with student sense of belonging. From this review of literature, three general themes emerged that help us understand what is central to the implementation of CRP in the classroom: (1) Shifts in Teacher Perspective (2) Effective Teaching Practices (3) Student/Teacher perceptions of Culturally Responsive/Relevant Teaching.

Shifts in Perspective.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy requires that teachers, administrators, and policy makers work to broaden their understanding of their “learners’ cultural lives,” as well as their own, and shift individual understanding toward “*transcultural identities*” which are identities that lie beyond not only the classroom, but beyond the borders of the United States as well (He, Vetter, and Fairbanks, 2014). In their article, “Reframing Literacy Practices for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students in U.S. Schools”, the authors call for a “reframing of educational policy and practice” to take on a *cosmopolitan* and a *multi-literacy perspective*. From a cosmopolitan perspective, a teacher could enable and encourage students to make connections to other cultures in a global way, rather than within the walls of the classroom. The opportunities to globally connect with others would allow students to experience and learn from other’s cultural and linguistic perspectives. Such a cosmopolitan view also provides the opportunity for diverse students

to recognize their “rightful presence” in any classroom (Squire & Darling, 2013), which is ultimately the essence of belonging.

Through a multi-literacy perspective, teachers reconsider the nature and usefulness of traditional literary practices, considering that a student’s use and manipulation of literacy text could possibly take on many different forms and stretch the concept of text beyond just printed form. For example, text from a multi-literacy perspective could be considered anything that can be used to negotiate meaning, such as writing, speaking, art, or performing. This approach encourages students to represent their literacy abilities in unusual and non-traditional forms. Examples from the article include writing fan fiction, creating Japanese anime, developing J-Pop music, and the use of social networking sites to learn from others. Examples are also seen in Tan and Faircloth’s (Tan & Faircloth, 2016; Faircloth & Tan 2016) work with refugee youth who expressed their multi-literacies by creating a podcast to share their STEM-based solutions to one challenge of living in an American refugee community, as well as creating original (collaborative) art to celebrates their refugee community.

Bomer (2017) suggested another needed shift in teachers’ perspectives by pointing out that teachers tend to assume students think like they do, when in fact students from different cultures have their own ways of thinking or doing things that can differ greatly from the teacher’s perspectives. In order to teach students who are culturally different from oneself, one must be flexible in his/her views of how curriculum is conceptualized. For example, for English Language Arts to become culturally responsive and sustaining, curricula should shift from traditional emphasis on Western

culture and experience, to reflect more closely each student's personal history, the stories of his/her experiences, and struggles. Bomer argues that the traditional Language Arts curriculums within American school systems have done little to promote Culturally Responsive Pedagogy. By mandating English only classrooms and classical literature studies, students of color have been denied access to their own language, literature and exclusive ways of making meaning while learning. Bomer (2017) illustrates the varying degrees of dominant culture focus in the ELA classroom through a continuum (Table 1) identifying shifts that need to be made in order for teaching practices to be more culturally responsive. The categories range from Culturally Colonizing on one end of the table to Culturally Restrictive, Culturally Tolerant, and Culturally Sustaining on the other.

Table 1. Bomer’s Continuum of Dominant Culture Focus in ELA Curricula

Culturally Colonizing	Culturally Restrictive	Culturally Tolerant	Culturally Sustaining
<p>Whole class texts; monuments of literature as objectives for their own sake</p> <p>Independent Reading; little or none</p> <p>Minimal attention to processes of reading and writing</p> <p>Writing assigned arguments about literary elements or themes for teacher grading</p> <p>Prescriptive grammar</p>	<p>Whole class texts; skills as the objective; text types matched to tests</p> <p>Independent reading: skill practice</p> <p>Assertions about what good readers and writers do</p> <p>Writing about texts; other genres as appropriate for testing</p> <p>Prescriptive grammar as structured on testing</p>	<p>Whole-class text; limited and inclusive</p> <p>Independent reading: student choice</p> <p>Inquiry into difference among readers and writings in the class</p> <p>Writing, largely personal, in varied genres for real audiences</p> <p>Sentence and word study-in context of use-as needed for expression</p>	<p>Whole-class texts; purposeful about advancing disadvantaged groups</p> <p>Independent reading: explicit encouragement to seek out texts that represent students’ own groups and language practices, as well as those of different groups</p> <p>Study of strategies for literate practices for advocacy and uplift of the community</p> <p>Focus on community and audience as a source of writing agendas, use of most effective languages and varieties of English for those audiences</p> <p>Analysis of language as an instance of power; valuing of heritage language and flexibility of language practices</p>

This model provides insights into constructing Culturally Sustaining experiences in a classroom, but Bomer points out that when moving across this continuum, a teacher’s mindset toward students of different cultures and ethnicities requires an actual “transformation”, in which the teacher experiences and enacts a sincere appreciation of a student’s contributions by acknowledging and drawing attention to the individual

student's life experiences and background knowledge each student brings to the classroom.

Effective Culturally Relevant Teaching Practices.

A variety of specific pedagogical strategies have emerged over the decades of research on Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and associated models. Some of those reviewed here provide direct links to ELA classrooms; others provide insights for general classrooms that can easily be translated to the ELA classroom.

As described earlier, Ladson-Billings (2009) worked with eight successful teachers of African American males over three years, to observe Culturally Relevant Teaching in action, and three common characteristics emerged: Academic Success, Cultural Competence, and Critical Consciousness. This study also concluded that each of these teachers valued their profession and the community where they worked. They built strong relationships with students and their families by taking part in community events and socials. They incorporated collaborative learning in the classroom which research has shown to be an effective practice to enhance each student's sense of community and belonging (Strahm, 2007). Additionally, the learning curriculum within each of their classrooms focused more on student interests than standardized testing and was open to critique.

Similarly, Bomer's work, outlined above, provides practical strategies. On his continuum, Culturally Sustaining practices parallel Culturally Relevant Pedagogy most closely, and include: whole texts with culturally relevant literature; independent book choices that represent students' own groups and language practices, as well as those of

different groups; increasing focus on community and audience as a source of writing agendas; and the use of most effective languages and varieties of English for those audiences.

Brown-Jeffy & Cooper (2011) developed a similar conceptual framework of principles to guide teachers' Culturally Relevant Pedagogy practices in the classroom. To begin, they pointed out the importance of recognizing how race is intertwined in Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP). Critical Race Theory values the voices of the oppressed and marginalized in the form of narratives which offer a different view than the views of those traditionally in power. That is, we must understand that CRP is grounded in Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) which works to *dismantle* the historically “*racist practices within academic institutions*,” such agency being central to CRP. Brown-Jeffy & Cooper (2011) drew on several theoretical concepts, including Gay (1994, 2000), Ladson-Billings (1994), and Nieto (1999) to develop their framework of Culturally Relevant Teaching practices in the classroom. The guiding principles they identified include: 1) *identity and achievement* (students and teachers need to understand the complexity of their identities and how these identities may be different from one another), 2) *equity and excellence* (addressing the needs of individual students and setting high expectations for all students), 3) *developmental appropriateness* (awareness of students' learning styles and other aspects of the student that make up who they are and how they learn best), 4) *teaching the whole child* (learning extends beyond the classroom into the community and home) and 5) *student-teacher relationships* (promoting a culture of care and acceptance).

Much like Brown-Jeffy & Cooper's conceptual framework, Schmidt (2005) observed a select group of secondary school teachers to observe how each teacher successfully incorporated seven Culturally Relevant Teaching characteristics (high expectations, positive relationships, cultural sensitivity, active teaching methods, teacher as a facilitator, student control of conversation, and group work, (Schmidt, 2003) into their English Language Arts instruction. Schmidt observed these characteristics during a four-year in-service program. His study included observation of teachers, teacher interviews, questionnaires and focus groups sessions, along with teacher's written reflections of their practice, in low socioeconomic schools where teachers had been trained to enact these characteristics of Culturally Relevant Teaching. He found that each of the teachers he observed drew upon their students' prior knowledge to learn more about their academic strengths or weakness before presenting the content of a lesson. Many of the teachers' assessments of prior knowledge required the use of student's senses (which helped capture and maintain student interest). In addition, he observed the way in which teachers connected with their students' families and extended the classroom beyond the school and toward the local community by holding parent-teacher meetings at recreational areas or local bakery/coffee shops. This extension of the classroom to community effort worked to deepen relationships with students and families, and connected learning experiences to students' personal lives. Teachers also conceptualized lessons within thematic frameworks linking literacy to other subject areas enabling students to make connections across content areas and allowing them freedom of expression and interpretation. Students were also encouraged to verbally share learning in

pairs and groups in order to communicate and in turn, strengthen one's understanding of concepts.

Another powerful example of CRP that is beginning to emerge in today's educational culture is participation in Ethnic Studies Projects. Although considered controversial by some, they may be a gateway to success for many students who consider themselves outside the traditional *whitestream* learning environments. Ethnic Studies curricula, courses, and strategies, offered in an increasing number of colleges and universities (and a smaller number of high schools) across the United States, are designed to raise students' critical awareness of racism and social inequity in America, thereby scaffolding the crucial Cultural Competence and Critical Consciousness elements of CRP. In her classic review of the academic and social value of Ethnic studies, she explains that ES came into existence during the Civil Rights Era, as a push back against traditional Western-European-based curriculum (Sleeter, 2011). During this time period, students of color demanded access to universities, curriculum relevant to their cultural experiences, and greater cultural diversity among university professors (Hu-DeHart, 1993). James Banks, renowned professor of Education and Multicultural Theory at the University of Washington, makes the argument that ethnic studies should be a staple in American school systems for all ethnicities (including white) to gain multiple cultural perspectives and to build a greater understanding of the contributions made by all ethnic groups in American society (Banks, 2008).

An excellent example of an Ethnic Studies (ES) program is the one piloted by the San Francisco Unified School District for high school students. The course was created to

offer perspectives and narratives from largely marginalized communities which are not typically included in traditional school curricula. (San Francisco Unified School District Humanities Department, 2017). Students who participate in ES within the district are offered the opportunity to read literature surrounding their cultural heritage and take part in conversations that explore power structures that have influenced and continue to influence American society. Students are also encouraged to discover ways in which they can take a more active role in influencing these systems in order to more strongly support their own communities. A recent study (Dee & Penner, 2016) is the first to evaluate the potentially causal effects of Ethnic Studies courses among at risk minority students within the San Francisco Unified School District. Ninth grade students were assigned to an ES course if their previous year's GPA fell below 2.0 and if they were frequently absent from school. 60% of the students were Asian, 23% Hispanic and 6% were Black; 18% were ELLS and 12% were identified as qualifying for special education services. The study found that participation in the course led to higher school attendance rates an increase in overall GPA as well as an increase in credits earned. Although this study differs in the previous studies reviewed in that it did not include surveys of students' perceptions it still lends itself to proving the overall effects of implementing CRT practices, as a part of an Ethnic Studies Course. In addition, Cabrera, Milem, Jaquette, & Marx, (2014) examined the Mexican-American Studies (MAS) program in Tucson, Arizona and found that the students who participated in the program had increased likelihood to graduate high school and pass all three exit exams (reading, writing, and math).

Student Perceptions of Culturally Relevant Teaching.

The literature available on Culturally Relevant Teaching is largely focused on ways to incorporate it into the classroom setting as a strategy to promote academic achievement for students of color, but it is difficult to find quantitative research related to *students'* individual perceptions of Culturally Relevant Teaching. A review of research provides evidence that Culturally Relevant Teaching is an effective practice for teachers to build relationships and connections to one another, strengthen student identity, and bridge educational gaps.

In year-long study by Howard (2001), African-American students from four urban elementary schools within the Northwest United States were interviewed and observed in order to gain insight into their perceptions of the ways their teachers delivered CRP. The study was also intended to determine if students' perceptions matched teachers intended goals for learning. Seventeen students (10 girls and 7 boys), ranging from low, medium and high achievement levels, participated in the study. Data was measured qualitatively and results revealed that three themes were apparent from the interviews with the students: 1) Students valued a teacher who demonstrated caring for them. 2) Students appreciated a classroom environment that was community centered. 3) Students liked when teachers made learning fun. The results of the study also determined that the students were more apt to excel when they felt their teacher believed in their abilities to do so.

In 2016, Byrd investigated how students' perceptions of culturally relevant teaching and school racial socialization relates to academic performance and attitudes

toward race. Participants included 315 students who ranged between the ages of 11 to 18, were in sixth to 12th grade, and were White (25%), Black/African American (25%), Asian American (25%), and Latino (25%). The study's survey assessed students' self-report of grades, school interest, view of instructors and teaching practices. The researcher hypothesized that Culturally Relevant Teaching practices including constructivist teaching strategies, cultural explorations, support of cultural competence and cultural socialization and critical consciousness would produce higher levels of student engagement, increased academic achievement and positive racial perception. (Byrd, 2016). The findings of the study revealed that focus on race and individual culture can make learning more meaningful and constructivist practices and encouragement of cultural competence leads to increased academic performance. However, "critical consciousness socialization" which deals with the critical consciousness aspect of culturally relevant teaching (when lessons and classroom discussions are centered on raising awareness of "prejudice and discrimination in society") tend to lower students' feelings of belonging in the classroom. (Byrd, 2016, p. 2) For example, when students realize that racism exists, they may feel they do not belong, but in turn, the study found that increased cultural competence can bring about a greater sense of belonging which may indicate that learning about cultural conflict may also enhance understandings of one's own culture and increase racial identity. Byrd points out the importance of students being aware of racial conflicts, by stating that students who understand that their group may be devalued by society, may experience less distress when they personally face

discrimination. These mixed results demonstrate the need to further explore the relationship between CRP and student belonging.

Students in Toronto and Vancouver, Canada took part in a project that incorporated what the authors termed *Identity Texts* (Cummins, Markus, & Montero, 2015). Identity texts expanded on the *multiliteracy perspective* of He, Vetter & Fairbanks (2014), in that teachers participating in this case study encouraged students to use their native language (bilingual, multilingual tools) to produce works of literature and art outside the traditional modes of print. The voices from students who participated in the project helped to shed light on the project's impact. Many participants called the experience life-changing. One student shared that she was able to demonstrate her abilities beyond what her teachers first thought she was capable of doing. Another student expressed that the project was like "finding himself," in that when he attended other schools he was never able to learn about his native Aboriginal tribe but through this project he was able to learn about who he really was. The case study revealed that enabling students to exercise multimodality while exploring identity and literacy can enhance students' understanding of themselves, the world around them, and make them more critically aware of powerful societal influences on their learning and achievement.

The Student Measurement of Culturally Responsive Teaching (**SMCRT**) was a similar study in which students' perceptions were the focus. The study took place within four middle-schools located along the U.S-Mexico border where 748 seventh-grade participants identified as Hispanic. Students were surveyed to assess their views of CRT practices. The data collected included the Psychological Sense of School Membership

scale to measure student's perceived sense of school belonging and teacher support. The report indicated that students who had experienced CRP experienced a greater sense of belonging and teacher support. This study included a "Diverse Language Affirmation scale" to measure the importance teachers place on languages other than English.

Students in the study expressed how valuable it was for their sense of belonging for their teacher to honor and include diverse languages within the classroom (Dickenson, Chun & Fernandez, 2016). These results, anchored in general school belonging, offer promising results that deserve further exploration.

Challenges to Implementing CRP in Today's Classrooms.

A collaborative study by Young (2010) served as a means to develop a better understanding among teachers and administration of how to utilize CRP in daily teaching practices and consider the challenges which arise when trying to define, implement, and evaluate Culturally Relevant Pedagogy within an urban school. The study used Critical Race Theory to guide critical discussions with staff and Ladson-Billings' framework of CRP (academic achievement, cultural competence, and critical consciousness) to guide observations of implementation. From interviews and discussions as well as analyses of district policy, initial interviews revealed one of the most glaring challenges staff and school administration faced was developing a common understanding of what Culturally Relevant Pedagogy actually was and the steps one would actually take to move the model into practice. Many of the teachers interviewed in the study were unaware or held misconceptions of how cultural capital and academic achievement were related to CRP.

Similar to earlier claims in this manuscript, this study found that teachers' "cultural bias" and lack of "race consciousness" created obstacles when trying to introduce Culturally Relevant Pedagogy into daily classroom learning regimes. Teachers were encouraged to build relationships with students; however, teacher interviews indicated only superficial practices such as celebrating multicultural holidays or occasionally speaking in students' native languages were the majority of activities taking place and these did little to increase student's cultural competence. Although teachers could articulate the importance of strengthening students' cultural identities and could readily show examples of incorporating multicultural literature into the curriculum, the value of examining the disparity between the dominant curriculum and the students' cultures was not embraced.

Young also identified several disconnects between CRP and what the district considered academic achievement, cultural competence and critical consciousness. When evaluating the district's policy during this research, the district strictly emphasized the importance of teacher accountability in regard to student success, but their policy toward student sociopolitical action/student agency was all but ignored. These obstacles were also exacerbated by the policies set forth in "No Child Left Behind Act" (NCLB) legislation, which placed significant value on student testing data and teacher performance. This translated into more time and effort being spent on making progress toward passing end of grade tests and less time for teachers to focus on Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. (Morrison, Robbins, Rose, & Gregory, 2008; Pahar & Sensoy, 2011). This is another powerful illustration of the need to continue investigating

how to implement Culturally Relevant Pedagogy with fidelity in the real world of teaching, which is the goal of this thesis.

Successfully Enacting Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.

In order to make Culturally Relevant Pedagogy manageable and a part of everyday curriculum, teachers need to be offered professional development on how to turn the theory of CRP into a practice (Morrison et al. 2008). Opportunities need to be provided for teachers to plan Culturally Relevant lessons and activities with colleagues.

But even with this in place, Culturally Relevant Pedagogy can have no place in a classroom's curriculum until individual teachers have time to critically analyze their own cultural biases and take the time to learn about their own and other's ethnicity, cultural sensitivities/values and see classroom curriculum as an avenue for social change (Zenkov, et al. 2013). This also requires school curriculums to shift from Transmission based theories of learning toward the Culturally Relevant Constructivist approach, in order for students to learn through inquiry and develop their own understandings and real-world connections (Morrison et al., 2008). Smaller class sizes and funding to support this work could also make a profound difference, but may not occur anytime soon. Despite the complexities involved and the fear of not getting CRP right, teachers need to be willing to give CRP a chance to work within classrooms. First attempts may not go as planned, but the lessons learned from these moments of failure can help educators grow as Culturally Relevant practitioners and develop the skills in implementing these best practices for their students. (Puzio et al., 2017)

CRP and Belonging: The Current Study

In my own growth as a teacher committed to student belonging and culturally relevant practices, I have had the luxury of partnering with a local university School of Education. Not only have I had the support of partnerships with faculty and relevant, university-based professional development, I eventually enrolled in their Master of Education program in Learning Sciences. This experience has led to my investment in ongoing action research in the areas addressed in this manuscript, and culminated in this thesis specifically exploring the relationship between meaningful Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, student Sense of Belonging, and their engagement and success (defined in ways that respect CRP) in my classroom. I am committed to the “Remix” version of CRP, which tenaciously clings to a culturally sustaining interpretation, and fights for meaningful growth in my awareness and my students’ cultural competence and critically conscious understanding and agency.

Table 2 on the following page, reveals a synthesis of the many culturally relevant and belonging-supportive models and strategies I have studied. These disparate lenses do not align perfectly but do echo similar principles that provide common themes around which I have organized my work and constructed classroom strategies that reflect each category. I have organized them under the CRT headings: Press for Academic Success, Cultural Competence, and Critical Consciousness. (It is important to recognize that many of the strategies related to multiple areas.)

Table 2. Culturally Relevant and Belonging Supportive Tenets/Strategies

Press for Academic Success	
Brown-Jeffy & Cooper 2011; Ladson Billings 1995, 2014; Schmidt 2005	<u>1. High expectations</u> for all students with consistent focus on making that a reality.
Boomer, 2017; Brown-Jeffy & Cooper 2011; Faircloth 2009, 2015; Faircloth & McClanahan 2017; Ladson Billings 1995, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2017; Schmidt 2005; Vetter, 2015	<u>2) Leveraging students culture and identity to support their learning</u> Awareness of complexities of students' identities, cultures, experiences, interests, strengths, learning needs, and integration of that knowledge to support learning. Example: Use of most effective languages & varieties of English (including valuing of heritage language, flexibility of language practices & integrating African American language within day-to-day classroom discourse) to support learning.
Cultural Competence	
Ladson Billings 1995, 2014; Gay, 2002; Urietta, 2009; Bomer, 2017	<u>3. Transformation in teachers' perspective</u> Teachers recognize their own biases & understand own culture
Bomer, 2017; Ladson Billings 1995, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2017; Vetter 2013; Vetter, He & Fairbanks 2014	<u>4. Integrate students' cultural and histories into learning</u> Teachers experience and enact a sincere appreciation of students' contributions Such positive relationships lead to culture of care & acceptance Use texts that represent students' own groups & language practices, as well as different groups Integrate African American language within day-to-day classroom discourse Transcultural identities; Cosmopolitanism; & Multi-literacies / languages Non-traditional representations of student work
Bomer, 2017 Brown-Jeffy & Cooper 2011; Ladson Billings 1995, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2017; Schmidt, 2005	<u>5. Learning extends beyond classroom</u> ; connecting with students & families outside of school Focus on community & audience as a source of writing agendas
Critical (Socio-political) Consciousness & Agency	
Ladson Billings 1995, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2017; Salinas & Alarcón, 2013; Vetter, 2017	<u>6. Awareness / Understanding</u> Recognize societal and educational power structures, norms Critical conversations (This item fits in multiple categories.) Deconstruct myths about student & cultural groups
Brown-Jeffy & Cooper 2011; Faircloth & McClanahan 2017; Ladson Billings 1995, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2017; Salinas & Alarcón, 2013	<u>7. Advocate for self & learning</u> Equity in Learning – addressing the needs of individual students Working with students to dismantle barriers to their learning & equity Teacher as facilitator / Student control of conversations Hybrid spaces (e.g., movement in and out of the academic expectations of being smart while balancing the peer expectations of popularity, social inclusion, and cultural expectations)
Ethnic Studies Models; Salinas & Alarcón, 2013; Paris & Alim, 2017; Schmidt 2005 Vetter, 2015	<u>8. Advocate for Others</u> Analysis of language as an instance of power Raise students' critical awareness of racism/ social-inequity in America & their own agency

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Belongingness Strategies.

My classroom setup and learning strategies are aligned with a Vygotskian model of social learning, with me acting as a facilitator while students work together to formulate understanding and gain knowledge as a community of learners. Student arrangements for learning typically include flexible grouping¹, cooperative learning², learning stations, tiered assignments³ (based on reading levels and vocabulary needs), individual learning contracts⁴, and book clubs which take place before and after school once or twice weekly. This classroom culture is designed to serve as a fertile setting in which to apply Culturally Relevant Strategies and support students' belonging. I have designed at least one strategy for each of the common themes identified in my synthesis. Some are strategies that are common practices in my classroom, others are designed specifically for this study.

Strategies Focusing on Insuring Academic Success.

For me, implementing CRP begins with a focus on learning about my students' identities, interests, cultures, in an effort to use this information to create learning opportunities that are meaningful to them. I do quite a bit of research on each of my students in order for me to learn which specific cultural tools my individual students find

¹ For delivery of instruction students may be grouped as a whole class, small groups, partners or triads to maximize student performance.

² Students work in teams to reach a common goal with member of the team fulfilling a particular role to complete a task. Students evaluate individual and group performance upon completion of task.

³ Students work on the same learning objective, but assignment matches student ability level and readiness to complete more challenging activities.

⁴ Student works with teacher to develop a regime of study based upon a student's personal interest of a topic and will follow an agreed upon schedule to complete the study.

most meaningful in their quest for learning and understanding, and I work to build on these preferences. During the first two weeks of school, I typically have students respond to specific questions on student identity, culture, community, and belonging as well as reading interest surveys and learning styles. I have students respond to journal prompts related to their personal identity as readers and what types of books they enjoy reading or if they enjoy reading at all. Early lesson plans include exploring our personal identities and cultures. Students also explore their social identities and work in groups to find commonalities by comparing and contrasting their identities with others. Students will respond to specific journal prompts to gauge the effectiveness of these experiences.

Based on student responses to the above inquiries, I typically implement different CRP strategies such as being offered opportunities to choose from particular formats (multimodal approach) for their completed products such as some type of written product, or a visual, or an audio of their responses. Allowing my student's opportunities to choose the between linguistic, visual, or audio allows them choice and creativity. Another strategy includes gamifying our classroom so students work together in order to reach a common goal. This increases social interaction and also helps to create a sense of community or belonging within our space. I will also use a Student Portfolio of their writing and learning in class that includes an opportunity for them to set and track personal learning goals.

I also invite students to participate in research related to student belonging in my classroom. Throughout the school year, we typically discuss, strategize, and write about what Classroom Belonging means to them and how it can be made a reality in our class.

Information drawn from student writing journals, student classwork and homework, surveys and focus groups help me recognize which activities and strategies are most meaningful to my students.

As I am working to become a more culturally relevant teacher, I also strive to set high expectations for students and believe that if I am consistent in supporting their connections to learning, my students will achieve the learning goals we have in place. My commitment during this study is to follow the model provided by Culturally Relevant Pedagogy which attempts to leverage students' interests or background to offer them an opportunity to channel their leadership in a positive way regarding learning. My goal is to work with any student who is not finding learning meaningful in my class and to embrace their resistance, using it as information to help us negotiate/construct a meaningful learning community.

Strategies Designed to Support Cultural Competence.

One of the most crucial elements of learning to teach in culturally relevant ways is growth in my own perspective and understanding as a teacher of such diverse students. Partnering consistently with a local School of Education and completing (almost) a Masters' Degree in Learning Sciences, has served as a constant source of insight and challenge in this area. Many lessons from my courses and interactions with faculty have already become a part of my classroom practice. One example of my Masters coursework transforming my daily practice was when I had students who seem resistant to take part in group activities or complete required coursework. I typically would have encouraged them to speak out more and share their extensive knowledge with the other students.

Luckily, in a recent class (Sociopolitical Contexts of Teaching) we learned about Individualism vs. Collectivism. I immediately became aware that I was pushing my own individualistic view of society onto this student who may not have been raised to appreciate that view. I now find myself considering cultural differences and ways of thinking before assuming that my perspective and way of doing things is the acceptable way things should be done. I am committed to consistently working to embrace such transformative lessons. Another lesson is to allow students who find it easier to make their point in their own language, they can write it that way, talk with a friend and talk through their understandings and interpretations before trying it in English.

At the beginning of the year, I also work with students to research their identities, with a focus on their cultures. To help with this, we begin by researching and evaluating the significance of their names, their heritage, their individual customs, traditions and values as well as the strengths within themselves that influence their abilities to be leaders and to find a meaningful place within our community. Our work will begin with the following:

Example 1: My Name Lesson.

In a lesson adapted from the website “Facing History and Ourselves”, I will have students read (in partners) an excerpt entitled *My Name* from the book, *House on Mango Street*, by Sandra Cisneros. In discussion groups, students will discuss how Esperanza perceives her name and how it affects her identity. Students will work with a reading partner to create an identity chart about Esperanza based on what they have learned about her from the reading. Then students will discuss their own names and how they perceive

their names, where their name may have originated, and how their name may or may not influence who they are. They will proceed to make their own identity chart and compare and contrast their charts with the students sitting near them. Students will then write about their identity charts and what they learned about themselves and others from the discussion in their writing journals. As a class, we will discuss how their identity relates to what work is meaningful in our class, and ways in which we can co-construct such a relevant learning space.

Example 2: “The Bear That Wasn’t” Lesson (Group Work).

In groups of three, students will read the story, The Bear That Wasn’t by Frank Taslin. Through discussion, students will explore how labels that we give others or ourselves can influence how one perceives him or herself in society. Students will pair the reading of that story with a nonfiction text from an Educational Psychology blog entitled, *The Dangers of Labeling Others*. After reading and discussing both texts, students will compare the two readings in a Socratic Seminar. Following the discussions, students will create an identity chart for the bear and for themselves to compare and contrast.

Example 3: Who Am I? Poster Parties.

During the early part of our school year the students and I will work alongside our Social Studies teacher to learn more about the origins of our families’ heritages. Students will spend several days interviewing family members to learn more about the languages they speak, the significant aspects of our culture/customs and the religious/spiritual traditions and/or family rituals that may take place within each of their family units.

As a final product of their research, students will create colorful charts to share with the class. The charts will be displayed along the hallways near our classrooms for others in the school to observe “where we all come from”. Students will create short stories, poems, songs, photo albums, illustrations, or comic strips about what they have learned about themselves and their class from this project. The Social Studies teacher will work with students to identify their country of origin on a world map and then students will connect the project they displayed in the hallway with a string of yarn to the map. Classmates participate in a gallery walk to look at one another’s products and determine where everyone originates. Students reflect in the journals what they have learned from one another’s cultures.

Example 4: Writing as Agency, and as Connections to Family and Community.

Within my classroom, the school’s curriculum calls for a Shared Reading⁵ of the young adult Adventure/Survival fiction text, *Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen. The book is used as a springboard into the elements of story (characterization, setting, plot, conflict, and resolution) positioned within an Adventure/Survival Story genre. After completing the book this year, I plan to encourage students to write their own Adventure/Survival story, *situated within a social issue with which they are concerned*. Students will be supported in learning more about the factual basis of their chosen social issue and the reasons why this issue is an important one to address. They will be encouraged to consider multiple points of view on each issue. They will also be free to interpret “story” in multi-literacy

⁵ interactive **reading** experience that occurs when students join in or share the **reading** of a book or other text while guided and supported by a teacher. The teacher explicitly models the skills of proficient **readers**, including **reading** with fluency and expression.

ways, and final products will be shared with family and friends at a local coffee shop during the evening. It is my hope that writing about an issue that matters to them (that they would like to impact), choosing their own mode of sharing their work, and sharing with their families and community at a community coffee shop will work together to support and showcase their Academic Success, their Cultural Competence, and their Critical Consciousness.

Strategies Designed to Support Critical Consciousness and Agency.

Critical Consciousness and Agency is an area I continue to nurture and expand as I work to make my classroom culturally relevant. This is where I feel my students should be given the flexibility to identify, discuss, and explore social/political issues of interest/importance to them. Once these issues are identified, students can work together to find ways to become agents of change or support with regard to issues that matter to them.

Example 5: Awareness of Socio-Political Issues & TED Talks.

In the materials we read in class, the class becomes aware of social issues reflected in what they read. They enjoy becoming “socio-political” detectives and view the book with a more critical lens, pointing out social issues to one another as issues become apparent while they read. This year, I plan to keep a list of these issues and let students research an issue from the list they consider important and would like to do something about. They will be given the opportunity to develop “TED TALKS” to share the issue. My plan is for them to share their work in class, as well as with friends and family at a social gathering off campus.

Example 6: Advocating for Oneself and One's Learning.

I plan to encourage students this semester to set goals for their learning. They will use interactive reading/writing notebooks to take notes, respond to reading prompts (e.g., about issues of culture, identity, and belonging) and communicate with me when needed. This method of communication will hopefully allow students an opportunity to express their feelings about assignments. Students will also be encouraged to question why we are learning certain things. I will ask students to answer the following prompt: "How was today's lesson relevant to your life? If you answered no to this question, how could I make it more meaningful to you? How will this benefit you today or in the future?" When they indicate that the lesson doesn't seem applicable to their lives, I will reconsider my method of teaching or work to make the lesson more meaningful by incorporating student suggestions.

Example 7: Exercising Agency with Local Immigrants and Refugees.

With Greensboro serving as home to one of the fastest growing immigrant and refugee populations in the country, students in my classroom are often interested in the plight of immigrants when they read current event articles on modern day immigration in the United States. Recently, students have been concerned about the travel bans put in place by the current United States administration to keep certain populations from entering the U.S. Most students have questions about the populations that had been placed on the banned list, what motivated the current leadership to put this ban in place, and what the lives of immigrants and refugees might look like prior to coming to America.

This year, I plan to harness this student interest by offering them the opportunity to form a “club” which would explore these questions. Students will research information about the countries of origin and experiences of immigrants and refugees to Greensboro, and their needs as they adapt to life in Greensboro. They will then be allowed to design a “Service Learning Project” in order to directly connect with local immigrants and refugees.

CHAPTER III

SUMMARY

The importance of students' sense of belonging to their motivation, engagement, and achievement makes the case for continued efforts to empower student belonging. Contemporary understandings of belonging, with roots in students' culture, identity, and agency, coupled with the latest calls for a critical lens suggest its fit with Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. Models of key elements of Cultural Relevant Pedagogy overlap significantly with factors and strategies to support belonging such as connecting with students' identities, cultures, backgrounds, and agency to resist educational and societal barriers to belonging. The small number of studies that have begun to explore the relationship between student perceptions of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and their reports of Psychological Sense of School Membership reveal promising results. The goal of this thesis is to contribute to our understanding of the intersections of these two experiences for diverse, young adolescent, English Language Arts students, by weaving the best strategies drawn from Culturally Relevant Pedagogy into their work in their ELA classroom, while consistently exploring with them the nature and impact of (specifically *Classroom*) Belonging. The focus on Classroom Belonging, rather than School Membership is significant, because the work is focused on one teachers' classes. The Middle Grades setting is also important because of the scarcity of Belonging/CRP

research at this level, and evidence from my previous classes that sixth-grade students are passionate about the issues involved in this study. The project is designed to address the following research questions:

1. How do students describe the impact and value of the Culturally Relevant Pedagogy Strategies included in their ELA curriculum?
2. How do students describe the development and importance of their sense of classroom belonging during this project? To what do students attribute their level of sense of belonging?
3. What, if any, relationship do students perceive between Culturally Relevant strategies and their sense of belonging?
4. What evidence exists (student work, classroom observations, focus groups) that Culturally Relevant Pedagogy impacted students in positive ways (including their sense of belonging, engagement, learning success).
5. What evidence exists (student work, classroom observations, focus groups) that students have realized or developed the agency to shape their school, community, or societal experiences to be more culturally relevant, equitable, and supportive of belonging?

Position Statement

As American classrooms become more diverse, the academic achievement gap between students of color and white English speaking students continue to grow wider. As a twenty-three- year veteran of the classroom and with thirteen years' experience teaching sixth grade Language Arts, this causes me distress. Year after year, the year-end

testing data we receive from our state confirms this statistic. I want to find a way to decrease this academic disparity between students of color and white English speaking students. Through my research, I have come to realize that in order to meet this goal I must utilize strategies and approaches to learning that are most meaningful to my students. The purpose of this study is to discover which specific approaches and strategies my students consider to be most meaningful and to incorporate these into my daily lessons as an effort to close this achievement gap.

Methods

Participants.

This classroom which was the setting for this study is situated within a large metropolitan area in the Piedmont Triad of North Carolina. The school district serves approximately 71,747 students. The total district population includes students from diverse backgrounds which include: American Indian - 0.42%, Asian - 6.25%, Black - 40.62%, Hispanic -15.15%, Multi-Racial - 4.01%, Pacific Islander - 0.15%, White - 33.4%. Within this community, 105 languages/dialects are spoken. 10,733 (includes pre-K) receive Special Education Services. 13,792 are Advanced Learners. The poverty rate for students in this district is 65.1%.

To insure anonymity, the middle school where this study took place is referred to as Friendly Middle School (FMS). FMS is a Title 1 school located in a quite suburb of the city surrounded by single family homes as well as apartment complexes scattered throughout the existing neighborhoods. FMS' diverse population of 716 students hosts grades 6-8 and includes: Asian-4%, African-American-52%, Hispanic-20%, White-19%

and Other/Mixed-5%. 64% of the students who attend FMS are eligible for Free/Reduced Lunch based on parents' gross annual income.

The semester-long study took place within one teacher's Language Arts Classrooms at FMS. She teaches 3 classes of 20-27 students in each class. Her classes were divided in to what FMS refer to as Core Classes. Ms. M's Core 1 (Advanced Language Arts) class included students identified as Advanced Learners based on the previous year's Reading End of Grade score as well as their previous year's grades. Classroom instruction included the current year's curriculum as well as the next year's curriculum in order to challenge students appropriately, Lessons were continuously modified to individual student need. Her Core 2 (Inclusion) class served students identified as Special Education students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs). IEPs are plans which meet the students' specialized learning needs in reading and writing. In this class, lessons were modified and structured to each students' IEP as well as individual learning styles. Her Core 3 class was considered an average performing class. Students in this class, did not have IEPs and do not qualify for Advanced Learning classes. Instruction was planned and delivered based on student need and individual learning style.

Permissions.

I received approval from the International Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro to conduct research on Human Subjects. I also obtained a letter of support from my principal as well as approval from Guilford County Schools to

conduct research in my classroom. Permission forms were obtained during the 2017-2018 school year from parents to allow students to participate in this study.

Measures.

Many artifacts from the classes served as data to identify teacher design and use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Teacher Lesson Plans, Assignments, and Journal). Artifacts used to understand student belonging and response to CRP strategies include observation of student group work, partner work, classroom interactions, and student work artifacts (including all student writing, student homework and classwork, discussion feeds via student tablets).

Students participated in focus group interviews at the end of the semester addressing questions drawn from the Focus Group Framework (Table 3) below. Wording was modified during focus groups to mirror students' level of understandings, which was likely to be challenging. One strategy used as a starting point was to talk first about concrete experiences they have had in class, rather than abstract feelings or experiences.

Table 3. Focus Group Discussion Framework

<p>Sense of Classroom Belonging</p> <p><i>(i.e., To what degree do students feel a “sense of classroom belonging in our classroom? What does “belonging” mean to them? What experiences contribute to their sense of belonging? In what ways are these experiences valuable to students and their engagement in our learning community?)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What has been your most meaningful experience in our classroom? What made it meaningful to you? How does it affect your experience in our class to have experiences that are meaningful to you? • Since we have talked all semester about “sense of belonging,” what does feeling like you belong in this class mean to you? What affects whether you feel like you belong? What difference does it make to feel like you belonging? • Another way to think about whether you feel like you belonging is to think about whether you feel like you have a “rightful presence” <i>(the right to be fully yourself in this class and to engage in learning in truly meaningful ways)</i>? What kinds of classroom experiences help you feel this way? What difference does it make whether you feel this way? • What “barriers” prevent you from feeling free to be yourself – or participate in meaningful ways - in our learning community, school or society? Are there aspects of yourself or your life and background, that you do not feel like you can share openly in class? • <i>What could we about these barriers to belonging in class, school, community, society? Are you interested in doing something about them? Why or why not? Are you able to do something about them? Why or why not?</i> (This question reappears in the next session as it is a crucial element of culturally relevant learning.)
<p>Culturally Relevant Classroom Experiences</p> <p><i>(i.e., What experiences in class allowed students to draw on their own identity, cultural, community, and background as they took part in our learning community? In what ways were those experiences useful / valuable? To what degree do students feel like they can – or want to – shape their experiences to be more reflective of their identity, culture, community, and background?)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What activities have we done in class that have helped you learn more about yourself, your culture, your community, your background? Please describe those activities and how they affected you or your participation in our classroom? • In what ways have you had the chance to share your culture, identity, community, background, and ways of doing things in this class and/or to learn about these things in the lives of others? What types of activities would help you feel like culture and background mattered in this class? How has this influenced you and your classmates’ participation in this learning community? • What was your reaction to: <i>I will mention various culturally relevant activities used as part of this study.</i> How did they affect how you feel about yourself, our class, your learning, your ability to change things in school or in your community that are important to you? • <i>What could we about these barriers to cultural relevance in class, school, community, society? Are you interested in doing something about them? Why or why not? Are you able to do something about them? Why or why not?</i>

Analysis.

Because this investigation was genuinely exploratory in nature, data analysis did not begin with a predetermined coding scheme. Through an iterative and constantly comparative process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and construction of matrices for comparing themes and student statements across data sources and participants (Miles & Huberman, 1994), central themes emerged. Specifically, data from student work, observations and focus groups were explored for patterns regarding students' perceptions of connections made between course content/activities (specifically CRP strategies) and facets of their identities, culture, agency, belonging as well as the impact of those connections on their engagement and motivation. Matrices were constructed that offered a profile, across participants and data sources, of points of convergence as well as diverse experiences with respect to emerging themes.

Consistent multi-student/multi-data-source support was required to justify emerging themes and sub-themes; this process provided triangulation of and therefore confidence in this interpretation of the data.

Findings and Interpretations

The purpose of this study was to look for evidence of the impact and/or value of the three pillars of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (ensuring academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness) within a middle school language arts class and to determine whether CRP impacts students' sense of belonging. Within this section I will review how my analysis of my student's work, classroom observations, student writing journals, and student interviews revealed five recurrent themes categorized as

1) *meaningfulness* 2) *clarity* 3) *validation* 4) *connections* and 5) *agency*. Based on my analysis, these categories most closely reflect what students from this study perceive to be valuable supports to their feelings of belonging, identity (which has been directly linked to their belonging) and success.

Throughout this section, discussions of each category are linked to the three pillars of CRP, and the students' themselves, through quotations of their own statements, illustrate how students valued each category and highlight how these categories, which are grounded in the work of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, work to develop student belonging and identity. Students are referred to generically to assure anonymity throughout. Results suggested that students' Sense of Belonging was so intertwined with the Culturally Relevant Strategies that we explored in the class, that the Second Research Question (How do students describe the development, importance, and the cause of their sense of classroom belonging during this Project, and what, if any, relationship do students perceive between Culturally Relevant strategies and their sense of belonging?) that insights related to Research Question 2 are woven in to the results addressing Research Questions 1.a., 1.b., and 1.c.

Ensuring Academic Success.

The Value of Meaningfulness, Connections, and Clarity to Academic Success and Belonging.

This first pillar of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, *ensuring academic success*, emerged across all data sources. Most students (from each core class) referred to *meaningfulness, connections, and clarity* as ways in which they saw their teacher (me) work to motivate, support, and ensure their success and belonging.

Meaningfulness and Connections.

Meaningfulness and *connections* (which at times seemed inseparable in students' stories) emerged most predominantly as an asset to student success. Within focus group sessions, for example, students were adamant about the significance of activities which were directly related to their personal interests, identity, learning styles and strengths. Their responses indicated they felt more successful when learning was *meaningfully connected* with who they are and where they are from. For example, students indicated that creative writing and writing in general connects with their identity "because they can express their feelings and opinions." Debates in class on issues of which they find importance, strengthens feelings of belonging and enhances identity as well. Alicia, a Vietnamese student had this to say about the impact of writing and debates.

Creative writing and writing has connected with me because I love doing it. Debates have connected with me because the topic of "Endangered Animals" has always been important to me. Poetry has also connected with me because I write some of my own.

In focus group interviews and in journal prompt reflections, students mentioned a variety of learning experiences that were meaningful to them in different ways. For instance, many students indicated participation in the Escape Room challenge during the Adventure Unit was meaningful because it allowed them to demonstrate strengths they *may not have been able to share or demonstrate to their teacher or peers in a regular classroom setting*, strengths such as leadership, logical thinking, and organization.

Another activity most students considered to be meaningful came at the beginning of the school year. As an opportunity for students to reflect on themselves, students participated in a classroom writing activity where they each worked to create their own “six word memoirs”. Their writings would be developed into artwork using hallway and classroom ceiling tiles. This activity encouraged students to identify their individual character traits by writing a page or so about a variety of things that either made them happy, or proud of themselves, or revealed something about their character others may never notice if they weren’t told. Students then analyzed the writing and determined six words that stood out and best represented how each student perceived him/herself. Once students determined their six words, students were given the opportunity to decorate a ceiling tile from our school’s hallway or classroom to display their personal six-word memoir. Observations of students working and interacting with one another while composing their memoirs indicated high engagement and enjoyment. Students were concerned about making their tiles colorful, bold and meaningful. When the ceiling tiles were completed, they were put back into place, so students, faculty, and parents could

read students' memoirs when walking through the hallways or visiting the classrooms throughout the year.

One student's memoir read: "Beware the fire in her eyes." Another student shared, "I have Turner Syndrome, I'm unique." And another's read, "I just wanna enjoy life, please!" The meaningfulness of this activity is indicated through a focus group discussion where several students responded to the interviewer:

Interviewer: What is an activity you have done that has helped you be successful this year?

Betty: When we were painting our ceiling tiles.

Interviewer: Oh, yeah.

Cindy: Yes.

Betty: That was fun.

Interviewer: So, tell me about that.

Betty: So when we're in the old building, we were painting ceiling tile with six words to the, um,

Janice: Yeah, like it was um, a six word m...

Cindy: memoir

Janice: Yeah.

Betty: Yeah.

Interviewer: A six-word memoir? Very cool.

Janice: and, stuff like that keeps me interested in class because it helps me *connect with myself* when I don't have the chances to do that at home or anything. So, I 'm able to write and express my feelings.

Betty: I feel like we need to do more of those because most of the students are not...usually liking some of the work that we may be doing. Uh, this work we're doing was very fun, but uh, if we can do a little more (of these kinds of activities) arts and crafts and visualizing things, it would be a lot more engaging and academic, um academically, and we will actually be trying our best to finish it...

Another example of the value of *meaningfulness* in support of academic success comes from one of my observations during a classroom learning experience where we took part in the shared reading of the book ***Peak*** by Roland Smith. Often it is a risk choosing a book to share as a group together. I have concerns of whether students will *identify* and connect with the protagonist and the conflict, but throughout this book, students were begging to read on each day. At the end of the reading, students were very verbal with their reactions to how the author chose to end the book. The students were gasping and crying out to one another, "Are you serious? Why did he (the author) do that?"

The student's reactions led me to ask them if they would like to critically analyze the book and then use their analysis to write a letter to the author about their initial feelings about the ending. The response was a resounding, "Yes!". With the students' help, I immediately worked up a crude analysis sheet based on their initial reactions to the ending. For instance, while they were engaged in sharing what parts were most interesting, which parts should be changed or developed further, and the range of emotions they experienced from beginning to end, I typed up a graphic organizer for them to complete. I felt that this format, essentially dictated by them, would be useful in

helping make sense of why the author chose to end the book the way he did. This was not a part of my initial lesson plan within our unit, but I wanted to give the students' a tangible way to share their strong reactions and record/organize their thoughts (a direct effort on my part to harness their own energy to move learning in a direction that they would find meaningful and therefore demonstrate success).

Students were encouraged to talk with table groups while completing the organizer/ analysis and the conversations were rich and detailed. Classroom engagement (critiquing, writing, collaborating, analyzing) was very high. Vocabulary we had used during the unit such as protagonist, antagonist, conflict, rising action, climax, falling action and resolution were being used naturally and in context. One student who typically struggles with completing work on time and exhibits behavioral issues in other classrooms made the comment to his table group that when he realized the protagonist was not going to summit Everest during the climax of the story, he felt like "the author shot me in both legs and then danced on them. I was devastated!" This comment reveals the students' level of emotional *connection* to the storyline, which supported his engagement. After completing her critical analysis sheet, one student used her notes from the graphic organizer to compose her letter to the author where she stated:

...There were very mixed emotions about the ending. First of all, I loved the way that you used the physical setting and the characters to develop a strong theme. I also loved the way you used the plot to develop a strong theme. So some people were a little bit frustrated about how he gave up all his hard work to reach the summit to Sun-Jo.

This student's response reveals the *meaningfulness* of the activity was closely tied to her emotional *connections* to the protagonists' decision at the end of the story and her surprise when it did not match her prediction of the ending. Her use of literary elements vocabulary, plot, and theme indicated she had gained good understanding of how the elements of a plot impact the theme of a story which could be enhanced because of the meaningfulness of the task.

Some students indicated that designing TED Talks during the Environmental Unit was a meaningful assignment as well. The TED Talks encouraged students to research and focus on a global or local environmental issue which was a personal concern for them. One student expressed the meaningfulness of the TED Talk by *connecting* the problems with our global environment to her personal role in it by saying:

..it was all about what's happening to our world now. And I read an article, it was all about the comparisons between the old time and now. And, I felt so much bad about even myself, because it said that in the old times, they didn't had any type of, um, trash, or plastics, or a-, they used to have, they were not as greedy as us.

As a teacher, facilitating learning and helping the students design their TED Talks provided a challenge to me. It was important that students found this a meaningful activity in which they could connect to their lives in some way (as they had begun teaching me that such connections mattered to the meaningfulness of their learning). Many of our students had never considered their role in environmental issues and had difficulty considering practical solutions to topics which seemed overwhelming at first such as landfill overflow, water pollution and genetic engineering. After some time of

struggling with students to help them make connections to issues they considered most important to them, I found that giving the students *time* to research and choose their own individual topic of interest was helpful. I also allowed time for them to focus, talk, and discuss these issues through Socratic Seminar and classroom debates. These talk times allowed students to grapple with the issues and problem solve together. These strategies helped students see not only their perspective but the perspectives of others, which influenced their approach to solving these issues and helped them come up with more meaningful ideas and develop solutions to their issue based on ways they connected these issues to their lives.

Although these are just a few examples of how meaningfulness of activities, supported by connections to identity, enhance success; students have indicated throughout this study that meaningfulness – especially through connections - is vital to their engagement and their feelings of success. One student whose first language is not English stated it this way in a focus group session:

Yes, I honestly, as I said, I don't really feel that when I write it's like that creative. But when it's something I feel big about...I would honestly, like [make]... a good job on it because I have so much ideas on it, but if it is like something that...inspires me., it would be easy for me to get better ideas.

The Value of Clarity.

Students also shared in focus groups and in journal prompts how much they value a teacher's efforts to provide *clarity* and *clear support* when having to complete classroom assignments. Students responses indicated they understood the teacher's purpose of scaffolding a lesson into manageable steps or that being offered strategies to

help them retain information was intended to support them academically. One student shared how when he doesn't understand something, "she will explain things more." Several other students expressed gratitude for being taught a simple mnemonic to know how to write a summary of a fiction text using the SWBST (somebody, wanted, but, so, then) strategy or having concepts explained to make them *clearer* through this discussion:

Sean: She's giving you skills.

Tina: To do a summary of a nonfiction book and fiction book.

Linn: Like if you don't understand what she's saying, she'll explain it more.

Other students expressed strong appreciation for the times they were- as one student put it-"pushed" to succeed. She went on to explain what it means for a teacher to push a student toward success through the teachers' *clarity* of firm expectations:

Jacqueline: Mmm, how, maybe, she would, if you didn't turn in work for a very long time, she would, she would maybe send you to study hall, and not just punish you but so you can finish your work and get a better grade, she cares about us, because we are doing this right now.

Students also went on to discuss (in a focus group) how their teacher's firmness was intended to reinforce best efforts and expectations:

Andy: I mean, like, sometimes, she could like, be mean when trying to ...but that's just the fact. That's just the-

Shana: She could be firm?

Andy: Yeah. Firm, But she's mean because she wants us to like...

Val: To...It's not really mean.

Shana: She's not giving to...she's not letting us go out easy, like a...

Andy: She'd be rather tough.

Cris: She doesn't want us to be lazy.

Andy: She doesn't want us to fail.

Students also recognized and valued extra chances to complete work and missed assignments or being offered extra credit as ways they are held accountable and offered a variety of ways to demonstrate mastery. Students saw these opportunities as “living up to the expectations” which have been made clear by the teacher. Most students perceived being given the chance to complete missing work in study hall as evidence of being given the opportunity to succeed. When students were asked in focus groups to share ways their teacher makes it possible for them to succeed, several responded by saying, ‘She gives us multiple chances to make up work, so that we’re gonna get a higher grade in her class.’ And another referred to the teacher’s reminder to check grade updates each day when she shared, “And, she always reminds us to check Powerschool whenever we’re just sitting on our laptops because she just wants to...so we can actually see what’s late.” This student response indicates he recognizes how the teacher supports students who may struggle by saying, “She gives out extra credit for the ones who have a low grade.”

Each of these responses reveal how students recognize the effort teachers go through to design learning experiences which are *meaningful* and *clear* and that students genuinely value opportunities this support for their academic success. The students did

not refer to these experiences as Culturally Relevant pedagogy, but the importance of this element of CRP was reflected clearly in students' voices.

Cultural Competence.

The Value of Validation and Connections to Student's Belonging.

The students in my classroom come from diverse cultures and backgrounds, so having students explore their cultural heritage, backgrounds and ways of doing things makes for great discussion and allows students to experience different perspectives and ideas. These explorations, followed by discussions and sharing of "who we are" validates students as individuals and solidifies their "rightful presence" in our classroom and school community. This section highlights ways our classroom has worked to honor the fluid and complex nature of our classroom culture, which validates students' thoughts, feelings, perceptions and attitudes which otherwise may bump against the external assumptions of what one's culture should be.

In one of our focus sessions, one student raised the issue of how the acceptance of diversity within a classroom can increase belonging, support their expression of their identity, and cultural competence:

I feel like our classroom is really great because there's so many people from so many different cultures and then we can freely present and express with each other and it doesn't really matter because we are all together in that classroom.

From my observations, I have noticed that when students are asked to write about themselves they are more engaged and focused, and will elaborate with little prompting. Most students in my classes have shared that writing creatively allows them the

opportunity to express and, at times, share “parts of themselves” with others. During the early part of the year, when students are sharing who they are in their writing journals, many students use the opportunity to write about their cultural heritage and unique skills as part of their identity. We also take the time to explore why we received the names we have and the origin/meaning of our names. We write about our reaction to these names and share these writings with a partner or group. When we share these writings with one another in class, it allows us to acknowledge the diversity in our room and establish deeper understanding of one another and these efforts work to develop an environment where different perspectives and viewpoints are valued thus increasing a sense of belonging for many students.

Below are examples of some of these writings composed early in our school year in which students identify unique aspects of their identity during an icebreaker activity to introduce “who they are” to their classmates. These writings reflect not just what students tend to value most about their identity, but which attributes are they are most comfortable sharing with others at the beginning of our year. Students have indicated they enjoy sharing these with one another since it helps them determine things they have in common and may not have known, if we had not shared. Jaison shared, “I am 12 years old. I am Mexican. I am a boy. I am smart. I love to play sports. I was born in XXX, NC. I am brave. I am a fighter and popular.”

Another student begins her narrative in much the same way, with more emphasis on where her family originated, “...I am Hispanic and African-American. I am eleven years old and a cheerleader and girl scout. I’m the youngest of my family. My mom is

from Arkansas and my dad is from New York.” Similarly, the following student’s writing reveals she values not only her heritage but characteristics specific to her identity, “...I am 12 years old, Hispanic-American and of course I am a female...I am fancy and sometimes simple. I am also very thoughtful when it comes to ideas I have good ones in my mind. This is me.”

Tomas begins by acknowledging the odd spelling of his name and the origin of his family as well, “My name is Tomas it’s spelled differently, so you can probably see the hefty problem I have had with teachers... My mom is from a small country in Europe called Bosnia and my dad is from San Luis, Mexico.”

During focus group interviews, students refer to these writings as ways our classroom is diverse and values diversity. One student mentioned that being able to share information about who they are and where they are from with one another helps prevent others from making assumptions about their ethnicity, family, and cultural heritage, values and/or traditions.

Throughout the year, as a requirement within each of our four learning units, our classroom enjoys the shared reading of a selected novel which is designed to be a part of our county’s adopted curriculum. These books are read aloud by me, and students are free to share aloud any questions, thoughts, surprises and connections they have made to the storyline as we progress. One particular book is a favorite with my students, *Zen and the Art of Faking It*, by Jordan Sonnenblick. The students love the sarcastic protagonist and his constant struggle with his identity throughout the plot. As we are reading together, students openly express how they can relate to the awkward moments he shares in this

plight as well as the ways in which he tries to hide his authentic self at school. Toward the end of the book, when students realize he faces big consequences for misrepresenting who he is, they become very verbal and animated and want to share their feelings about the plot. Most of the students request to write the author a letter to share how much they appreciated his writing. In an effort to honor their identity, culture and voice (which I expect to validate who they are and support their belonging), I allow the final products of their letters to reflect as much of who they are as possible. That means, we may give the letters a good “once over” for glaring spelling errors and sentence structure, but we don’t make a huge fuss over grammar and perfection. The letters are to be who these students are, in this moment, using the vocabulary they would actually use to express themselves. I share that with the author in my personal letter to him, so he knows what to expect in advance. Below are a couple of excerpts from students’ letters to Mr. Sonnenblick which demonstrate cultural competence and connections students made with the protagonist’s conflict:

Dear Mr. Sonnenblick,
I honestly loved your book.....towards the end it was great. Peter punched San. I like how you [brung] up San’s promise to Emily and didn’t make him hit Peter. I’m really surprised Peter wasn’t writing these notes. Oh, by the way, I’m Tyshon and it would be great if we met you in real life. If you gave characters the traits you have, I wonder how it would be meeting you.

Another student begins her letter by introducing her name which begins with a Y, but she goes on to spell her name phonetically, so Mr. Sonnenblick will know the correct

way to pronounce it. She also tells him she is from a small island in the Caribbean and her age. An excerpt of her letter goes like this:

My favorite part is when they are having the basketball tournament, and San gets a foul shot. Peter whispers in his ear, "You still got nothing, Buddha." San replies while releasing his best shot yet, "Except your sister." My whole class blew up.

After some time, Mr. Sonnenblick responded to the students by sending his own letter. This letter does a wonderful job of acknowledging, and validating the different voices, cultures, and identities which make up our classroom. I am including his entire letter here:

Hi-

Thanks so much for sending along your students' sweet letters, and for reading my book, *Zen and the Art of Faking It* with the class in the first place. I was struck by several things as I read through the stack. First, you have an incredibly diverse group of kids, in every way I can think of. There were kids who were clearly super high achievers; wise cracking funny kids, kids with typewriter neat handwriting and sloppier kids; children from many different cultures, and from all over the planet; and kids with a wide array of reading preferences, from fantasy to dystopian to my stuff. What an honor is for me that such a group could (mostly) agree on liking my work! (Although I have to admit, one kid confessed that some other kid in the class didn't like it which amused me.)

Another thing that struck me was how much agreement there was about which line in the book was the funniest. I guess nothing beats a good family-related burn. :)

The final thing was just how interesting your students' voices are. Every kid found some way to make me want to laugh, wince with empathy, or just feel glad I had "met" them.

Thanks again, and take care-

Jordan Sonnenblick

Sharing Mr. Sonnenblick's letter with the students was a highlight of the year. Students were ecstatic with joy and amazed that he responded. They even spent some time trying to figure out which one of them was the "wise cracking funny kid" referred to in his letter. During classroom discussions afterwards, students shared that this learning experience of connecting to a book and sharing different perspectives on their unique thoughts and reactions to the book provided students with an opportunity to express themselves freely and validated their own sense of diverse identity (the heart of this element of CRP).

During the middle part of the year, students were having a conversation about the different languages spoken in the classroom. This was not an organized conversation but rather one that popped up during our free time between settling in after lunch and beginning class gain. A student had pointed to a table in the room and said the name of it in his own language which was Farsi. Another student pointed and shouted out what it would be called in Spanish. The students began laughing and suddenly everyone was pointing to things around the room and naming them in whatever language they could speak. I was intrigued and started handing out index cards to all the students and told them to label anything in the room in whatever language they could. When we were finished, the clocks, desk, overhead, whiteboard, everything was labeled with so many index cards in so many different languages. The students had even written the name of the languages on the index cards so others would know. We all were excited to walk around the room and have everyone share how they would say what each item was and help us pronounce it in our own language.

In focus groups, students shared how this type of experience and others which recognize and honor their national languages increase their sense of belonging and validate their cultural heritage and identity. One student from India had this to say from after an encounter she had with a refugee family during our field trip with the E Pluribus Club (which will be shared later in this paper):

And, there was a family, who spoke, uh, Nepali, and they knew Hindi, I was also knew Hindi, so they are excited to see me, and I was excited to see them. And, I saw a lot of Indian flags there, our language, all over the place.

Although not mentioned in the previous section on *Academic Success*, results from my study indicate *validation* of diversity is a practice which not only enhances academic success, but all data points indicate its influence on increasing a student's sense of cultural competence as well. Moreover, the act of having their ideas, opinions, ways of doing things and intellect *validated* by peers and teachers positively affects students' sense of belonging.

The importance of *validation* was further illustrated in the following students' responses when they discuss being recognized by teachers and peers. One student, who was nominated by his team of teachers (for his outstanding service to others and his academic standing) and received the school's award as the Spotlight Student of the Month, had this to say about his experience, "...I got Spotlight kid for the month and that made me want to do better for myself and to live up to that."

Another student who is typically reserved during class discussions, expressed her feelings regarding the impact of sharing her thoughts and/or writings publicly to her

peers, “Um, I think that, um, when people listen to our stuff, I feel like we are important, we are, we are being [listen] to by everyone. Like, we are a part of it. We are, like we are so precious, like that.”

Barriers to Validation and Belonging.

At the beginning of the year, in response to my interest with CRP, I had decided to use *The Bear That Wasn't* Lesson, which was a lesson I adapted from the Teaching Tolerance website with my students. I hoped it would help my students think more critically about how they interacted with one another and how we often give people labels based on “who we think they are” rather than the ways people perceive themselves to be. During the lesson, we read the story *The Bear That Wasn't*, together and discussed the implications of the Bear in the story being called “a lazy human who was only wearing a fur coat and needed to shave.” The students discussed how the bear started to believe those labels to the point he reported to a factory every day and forgot to hibernate. After discussing the story, students read an informational text, *The Dangers of Labeling Others*, which I had found on an Educational Psychology blog. This text explained the long-lasting effects and stress related to the labels others may place upon us or that we may place on others, like being called academically gifted, stupid, lazy or silly, to name a few. After the discussion, students wrote about their reactions to the readings and discussions. Below are a couple of excerpts from students written reactions to this lesson that demonstrate how aware and sensitive adolescents are of being labeled by others:

...when I walk [pass] people/students and they start whispering I think they are [labeling] me like the other day I was walking to the bathroom and these two girls started whispering and walking and looking at me but sometimes I feel like “The Bear That Wasn’t” because at my old school people would tell me “oh your hairs nappy or you need an haircut or you need to run faster” or they would say I need to lose weight but I think that’s when I told myself that if someone has something to say about me I’m just going to let them say it and also just because your life isn’t going well doesn’t mean you have to make mine not go well, but I’m just going to go on with my life.

Another student wrote, “We think we are our own biggest critics. We become dependent on others’ ideas of who we are because the people in our groups are our comrades. We begin to question who we are based on what others say about us.”

Students indicate that being judged for who they are keeps them from being their authentic self at school. They indicate this judgment prompts them to hide the true nature of their identities from others. To illustrate this point, I will refer to a conversation from a focus session where students were discussing whether they feel free to be themselves at school and how this affects their sense of belonging:

Shy: Ok. So with the thing with everything belonging. I think that everybody had such different interests that people have them in common and so I have an interest. And so, instead of having a place to belong, I have to find those people by myself. But I’m like, very afraid to do it because that person is not always showing it and neither am I. So, it’s hard to find those people.

Lisa: Going back to what Trian said. Ultimately, *I think fear controls us*. Controls the way we act. Controls what we see.

Alicia: The thing is, even if we create a school where we can express ourselves. A club or a place where we can express ourselves. Of course, there’s always going to be that fear, which limits us in to saying what we want because we’re always scared that people will judge us for who we are.

People will treat us differently or we will treat ourselves differently to see how we view ourselves.

These responses indicate how influential other's perceptions of one another can be and how these perceptions can go as far as impacting how students "see" themselves, thus further complicating the already complex work of belonging and identity. Although many responded to incidents of being judged by others by declaring they do not care what others say about them, their writings indicate the contrary. The fact that students can remember the labels placed on them and can recall these incidents in detail indicates it matters very much what others say about them.

Additionally, the following responses reveal how a system's imposed rules and norms create barriers to self-expression and diminish one's sense of belonging and cultural competence. One student expressed it this way, "Well at school, there are a lot of rules that aren't really necessary and they don't really have an effect. Here, like if people want to be themselves, they can't really do that." Another student agreed and stated: "Yeah, 'cause I feel like at school everybody feels like you have to be a certain way, because you don't want other people to think something about you. Like you always have to act a certain way."

These particular interviews with students during focus group sessions revealed a pattern of concern for being judged by their peers as a barrier to belonging and/or their ability to be validated for their true self at school or in the classroom. Here is an excerpt from one of these discussions:

Lila: Like, say if one of your family members ever went to jail or court and you're just like, "Oh, so your family is a bad person. I'm not gonna talk to you because that might mean you're a bad person. But in reality your just like, "I just want a friend. Not...

August: Or sometimes they'll just be like, um, what's it called? Like, um, race or, um, like...or something, or whatever it's called.

Trina: Judgmental?

Lila: Yeah, judgmental. Like people can claim...some people be like, " Oh, I'm German. And then they'll be like, "Oh, you hate Jewish people." Or something like that.

Cal: Or like they make fun of you because of what you are. Like they begin to speak in those accents that aren't even true.

Alicia: Or, like, whenever they say, like, "Asians, they always have slanted eyes."

Further discussion of the issue of being judged for who they are revealed this to be a huge concern for students and diminished their sense of validation of their identity and their belonging. The students spent some time in this focus group discussing ways they could disrupt the stereotyping and judgmental actions of others, but final consensus from this group discussion indicated students felt they were powerless to change this problem in any way. They seemed to think it is something that will never change.

The Value and Struggle with Agency (Critical Consciousness).

Throughout this study and across data points, many students have indicated the value of doing something that makes a difference and/or making a change in some way and/or helping others enhanced their sense of belonging and validation of their identity. Many students mentioned a variety of times in class when they were offered ways to act

on their identity and influence change/awareness of certain issues within our classroom were significant to their feelings of belonging and identity. Two significant learning experiences included writing adventure stories in which the themes of their stories were constructed from social issues they felt strongly about and creating a TED Talk (as mentioned earlier) to provide solutions to environmental issues which concerned them. Their reference to these types of activities echoed the significance of *meaningfulness*, *connections*, and *validation* as ways to enhance belonging and identity as mentioned earlier.

The Adventure Story task culminated one of our units designed around an adventure theme. At the beginning of the unit, students read along as I would provide a shared reading of the text *Hatchet*, by Gary Paulsen and learning experiences were designed to develop a deeper understanding of literary elements and unique characteristics associated with adventure/survival genre. Through this study, students would be expected to demonstrate understanding of how different literary elements of a story advances the author's plot and impact the theme of the story. By the end of the unit they would apply these understandings through the creation of their own adventure story or comparative analysis essay. The fact that most students chose to create their own adventure story signifies the importance of connection to self through their desire to express themselves creatively.

Through this process of writing, students were to explore, research, and identify a social issue with which they had a strong concern. Students social issues ranged from racism to human trafficking. Most students worked particularly hard on these stories

making sure their social issue was a driving force in developing the theme of their stories. Students were so engrossed in writing we had to remind students that these were short stories, as some students were writing well beyond twenty pages of text at times.

Once students had completed the stories, we offered students the opportunity to “publish” their stories by sharing their stories at an event we hosted at a local coffee shop. This event was created to provide a type of “adventure” for them in which they would step outside their comfort zones and have the experience of sharing the stories with an audience of peers and parents. Students were also invited to enter their stories into a contest in which local judges read their stories for the Most Surprising Plot Twist, Edge of Your Seat Award, Best Developed Theme, Best Developed Characters, and Most Creative Adventure. Winners from each category were honored at the coffee house event. A few students who participated later wrote reflections on the experience and mentioned they felt special when they were sharing their stories, like they had something important to say. They also mentioned that stepping out of their comfort zone and sharing their social issue publicly was awkward and scary but made them connect with issues they find important and further helped them to connect with who they were.

The parents who attended the event were very verbal in how the event made them feel. Some of them noted that they never realized how well their child could write or that they felt so strongly about certain issues. Many parents mentioned how we needed more events like this to allow our students more chances to share publicly.

In the responses following this description, students share their unique perspectives of participating in a service learning project I sponsor at our school in which

students invited to enact *agency* while providing welcome kits to recently settled refugees in their hometown. The students named the club E Pluribus Unum which is taken from our country's motto and translated from Latin to mean: *Out of many; one*. The club was formed after a classroom discussion based on concerns students had about our national immigration and refugee issues. Students felt compelled to work together in some way to make the students in our school and community who were new to our nation, and ways of living, feel welcome. After a few club meetings, students had identified a local non-profit which worked to serve refugees placed in our area. The non-profit needed donations of welcome kits which provided basic hygiene items of soap, toothpaste, toothbrushes, combs, brushes, and deodorant items. Each welcome kit was valued at close to \$150 to put together. Club members were excited to have a project in which they could participate to make a difference.

Club members began working up a school-wide campaign in which homeroom classrooms would compete against one another to put together as many hygiene welcome kits as possible. The campaign lasted a month and by the end of the campaign our school had collected more than \$2,500 in welcome kits. E Pluribus Club Members contacted the local non-profit and set up a time to deliver the welcome kits during a school day. The non-profit provided a learning experience for club members in which they toured the non-profit, learned more about the experiences of refugees and were given the opportunity to meet and talk with refugees in a group session.

Students who participated in the club indicated that the act of providing welcome kits had a significant impact on each student's sense of belonging and identity by giving

them a reason to work together for others. One student had this to say about her experience:

Yeah. Um, club was the most meaningful thing to me because, uh, I don't know. I felt so much, um, happiness in my heart when I helped the refugees to the welcome kits.

And another responded to discussion of how participating together in the club helped create a climate of belonging by saying:

Um, actually, E Pluribus Unum means: "Out of many one."...with the E Pluribus Unum Club, I, I've always wanted to help, um, people, and well, this club has made it come true, really. And I just think it's important to, like, help people who don't have much resources.

Another participant in the club had this to add:

I am pretty sure the ones, the ones who are a part of the club are definitely going to help them again and again, because they understood the difficulties in their life, the crisis they are facing. So I'm pretty sure when, um, um... There was a girl called K___, when they explain about their life, she started crying. So, everyone was that much into it. Like everybody was that much into it. So, everybody now be depth of it in their life, the refugees, and like all their, um, crisis...

Students who participated in the E Pluribus Unum club were verbal about their reasons for being a part of the club. Many of the students say they participate because they want to make a difference in some way and make others feel more welcome in the classroom, school and community. These responses reveal how significant belonging is to these students and how important it is for them to help others feel like they belong.

Recently, during one of the club's meetings, a student who participated in our focus group session shared that there are many instances within our school where certain students feel they are being bullied. Students discussed this problem and concluded this may affect students' sense of belonging in the classroom or the school. Following this conversation, club members chose to change its direction for the remainder of the year to focus on bullying issues within our school.

Several club participants have volunteered to take Peer Mediation through the counseling department at school as their first steps of activism against bullying. One student shared in Peer Mediation training that "helping others resolve conflicts within themselves and with others may be a first step in stopping the problem at our school and I want to be a part of that." Another student shared that the idea of "providing safe spaces for students who are dealing with sexual orientation and identity issues" is a reason she wants to be involved in the club. However, she also expressed a concern that "students who participate in the club could potentially become targets for people who don't agree with their ways of expressing themselves." Students agreed that this may pose a challenge, but wanted to continue with their efforts anyway.

The participants in the club have started to work on an Anti-bullying video campaign where they are sharing stories of bullying and the long-term effects bullying can have on individuals. The video will also provide tips on ways to identify bullying and ways students can be an ally for others when they are being bullied. The video incorporates recent bullying statistics with students' personal accounts of bullying. The students are hoping the video campaign and Peer Mediation training will be ways they

can get the message out that something can be done to stop bullying and to help students feel they can be a powerful force against it.

This project is not complete, since the talk of supporting students' belonging through the three pillars of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy do not fit neatly into semester projects, but are organic, authentic, messy, and follows and honors – rather than controlling - what is meaningful to students, students' valid identities and perspectives, and student agentic choices.

Teacher Reflection and Discussion

From my year of working to incorporate Culturally Relevant Pedagogy as an effort to support student identity and belonging within a middle school setting, I have learned this is not an easy task. Adolescent students are grappling with their identities in ways they do not always feel completely comfortable sharing with teachers, parents, or classroom peers. The fluidity of culture is another puzzle that needs to be taken into consideration. It is a work which requires patience, planning, flexibility, understanding of student identities, and constant personal reflection.

After the initial review of data, I was surprised by some of the activities students shared as meaningful. The ceiling tiles and creative writing were the most surprising because I assumed they would consider these just “things to do” and not as meaningful as I thought they were. I was also surprised that some of the supports set up in the classroom were not seen as meaningful by the students. For instance, no one mentioned my classroom management CHAMPs where students are taught at the beginning of the year how to engage in conversation, get help from teacher and others, complete activities,

move around the room and come prepared for class. Students also overlooked the system we have set up for absent students. When a student is absent, someone volunteers and take notes and coach them the next day on what they missed, so they won't be behind, with the goal of the class learning to take care of one another. These make up what I see as important components of our classroom culture and I had assumed the students valued these components as much as I do. With all of this in mind, I have learned teachers should restrain from making assumptions about what our students think and who our students "think they are". We need to encourage them and provide spaces for them to feel free to be their authentic selves, as they make sense of issues of cultural relevance and craft a sense of belonging. Three overarching themes have surfaced that will help me continue this voyage with my students.

The first thing that has become abundantly clear during this year, and as I reflect on the year with the data, is that not only has there been no predictable path, but we have not needed one. Although I certainly began the year with well researched ideas that excited me, the students were able to find paths to meaningfulness for themselves even among activities that I did not anticipate being significant. I could not have predicted what was most powerful for them. Instead, it seemed most helpful for me to listen carefully and follow their lead, being spontaneous and flexible when they found connections that excited them. Capturing their own excitement when they were gasping and crying near the end of the read-aloud novel, ***Peak***, proved more valuable than any elaborate lesson plan I could have designed on my own. Similarly, I learned so much about teaching from them when they had the opportunity to leave their mark on the

school with their six-word memoirs and a few ceiling tiles. Relinquishing my efficient control of the classroom and allowing them *time* to wrestle with topics for their TED talks until they found one that was meaningful to them turned what may have been a mediocre assignment into one they were eager to invest in. I would never have thought to include in my list of CRP strategies the simples of strategies, like mnemonics, keeping assignments clear, and offering second chances. However, students explained in multiple ways how each of these experiences worked together to help “ensure their academic success” (the first pillar of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy). This was not because I had developed a perfectly laid out map, although I certainly tried, but because - like in their Escape Room - they had insights and interests and self-knowledge that I needed to listen to and follow.

A second overarching theme that emerged this year was captured by my students’ insightful, but alarming, claims that - for many of them – *Ultimately, fear controls us*. Without wrestling with these topics with my students throughout this year, I would never have realized just how rare, nor how important, true validation was for them. From every corner, and reflecting every aspect of their diversity, there were stories of self-censure, of fear of rejection if they were their authentic selves. Students repeatedly reported fear that they would be judged if they revealed their true, full “identity.” This is especially alarming given the fact that we purposefully engaged in many activities designed to provide a safe place for them to be themselves (discussions of diversity in our classroom, celebrating our different language resources in the classroom, sharing our authentic perspectives with nationally respected authors, writing our own adventure stories). This

revealed to me how high a priority “rightful presence” needs to be for my classroom, and for anyone attempting to scaffold belonging using the second pillar of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Cultural Competence).

This year, the third pillar of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy provided both one of the most rewarding examples of agency I have experienced with any of my students, and simultaneously the greatest challenge to both CRP and belonging in my classroom. The work that my students designed and completed to understand and support the lives of immigrant and refugee students in their community, along with their work to stand against the chronic bullying that exists at our school, were some of my proudest moments as a teacher. This display of agency is exactly what we, and Culturally Relevant pedagogy aims at for students. Moreover, every student involved agreed that it was a hallmark in their growing sense of belonging in class (i.e., “Out of many, one”).

Unfortunately, the challenge of helping sixth-grade students make agency or Critical Consciousness (i.e. speaking out to make a difference) a regular practice amidst the constant fear of judgement, that is their reality, is going to be a struggle. For example, although students consistently reported bullying to be their greatest challenge in schools, most (those not in the club) were adamant that they were powerless to do anything about it. If my students can feel free to be different without the fear of being judged, they have indicated through this study that it would increase their sense of belonging, their academic success, and help empower them to actively take part in the critical consciousness work that they already value. Therefore, the third over-arching theme from this adventure with my students is that my greatest challenge going forward is going to be

the quest to disrupt fear in the struggle for cultural competence, that undermines the agency that I know they are capable of.

These insights remind me that incorporating Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, to support belonging, is a long-term commitment. It is however, a work that needs to begin in all classrooms and continue to take place each day. From this study, *I think the most challenging part of this work will be found in convincing our students they have the power to disrupt the fear of judgment they perceive from peers.* This will provide a vital pillar for students to lay claim to the elements of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy that promise them the sense of rightful presence they deserve. This work must go on.

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